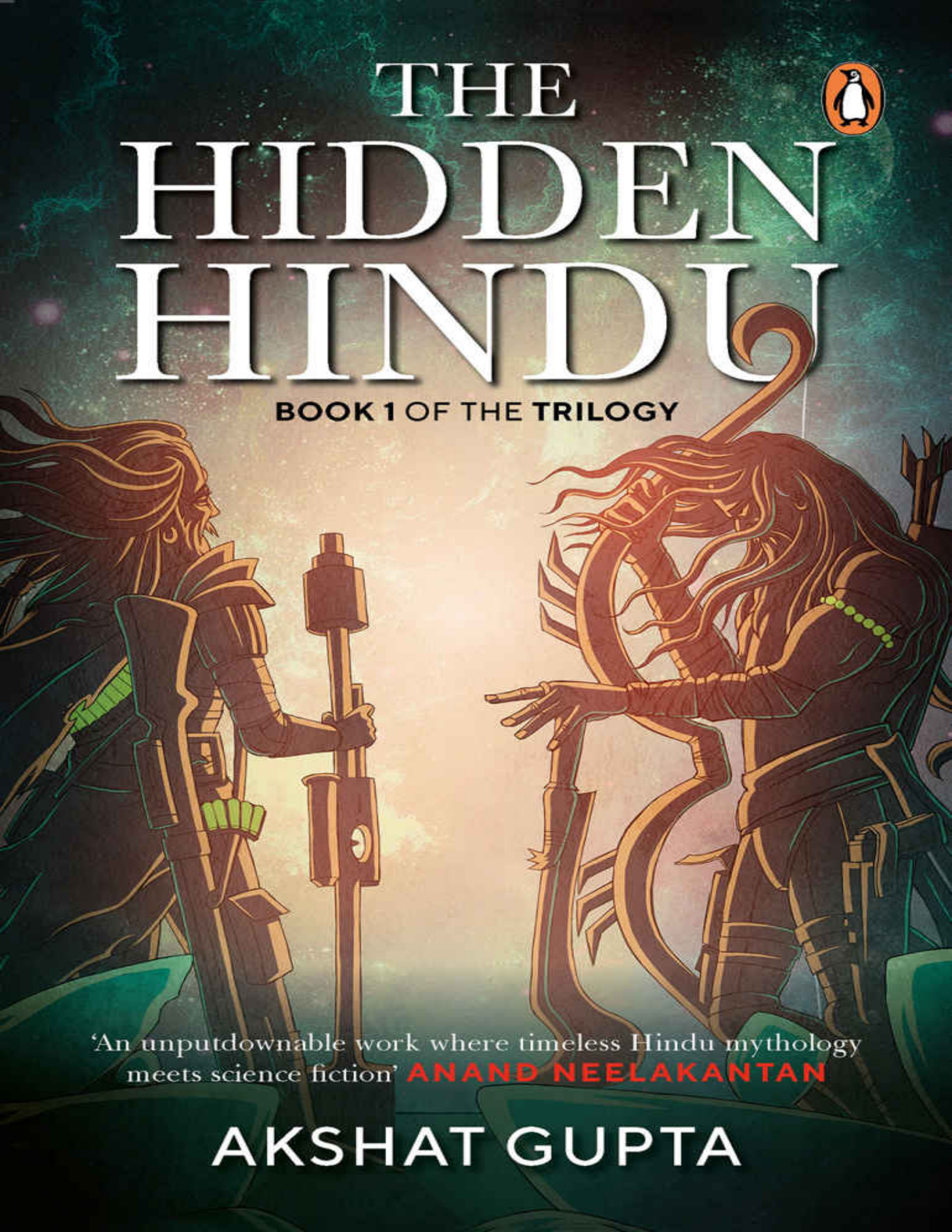
THE HIDDEN HINDU

BOOK 1 OF THE TRILOGY



'An unputdownable work where timeless Hindu mythology meets science fiction' ANAND NEELAKANTAN

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THE HIDDEN HINDU

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Contents

Memory of the Unborn

1. Unidentified Journey

2. Inconclusive Inception

3. Disconnected Disclosure

4. Names from History

5. Open Ends

6. Divine Yugas

7. Existence Exhibited

8. Cryptic Chest

9. Yesteryear’s Now

10. Outdated Deciphered

11. Mrit-Sanjeevani

12. The First Outbreak

13. Classified Transformation

14. Deathless Warriors

Acknowledgements

Follow Penguin

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Memory of the Unborn

Year 2041

There was an eerie silence in the room. It seemed like everything had come to a halt. The space between the empty walls of the room was filled with the sound of their breath. Before Mrs Batra could ask Prithvi what was bothering him, he turned around and, in a strong voice, said, ‘I have seen it all myself in 2020 and so I know that there has not been anyone like him before, nor will there ever be. He is the divine truth, an undefeated challenge to the gods of death and destruction.’

‘How can that be? You are saying that you have seen things from before you were even born? That’s impossible!’ said the agitated seventy-four-year-old Mrs Batra. She was bewildered as to how a boy who was around twenty years old in 2041 could have seen things from 2020.

‘You are right. I wasn’t born then, yet I was present in that facility on Ross Island in more than one way. I remember everything as clearly as if I am still there, witnessing it all happening right in front of my eyes,’ replied Prithvi.

Looking at Prithvi, Mrs Batra spoke again, ‘I have witnessed many incredible events and mysterious things in the last few years, things that science does not have an answer to. So I am compelled to believe that there are truths and mysteries that an average human mind like mine cannot process.’ With tears rolling down her cheeks, she continued, ‘I wanted to live a normal life and die silently,

like every average person. I almost got a satisfactory death in 2020. Things were good then. I wish I had died peacefully then, but everything changed.' Mrs Batra took a deep breath and tried to contain herself. Prithvi silently stood there, giving her time. After a long pause, she said 'Neither did I want to be part of any of that then, nor do I want to be a part of any of this now. Why are you here?'

'Because I am still searching for him and you are the last person to have seen him,' responded Prithvi with hopeful eyes. Mrs Batra looked into Prithvi's eyes and said, 'I lost everything in that fateful mission and yet, I don't know how or why. Yes, I have seen him. But I still don't know who he was. You were there on the island, you said. Tell me what happened on that island in 2020. You said you are searching for him. He was also there on the island back then. You must know who he was. What do you know about him? Tell me everything,' insisted Mrs Batra.

Prithvi stared at Mrs Batra for a while, and then eventually asked, 'Will you tell me everything that you know if I answer your questions?'

'I promise, I'll not hide anything . . . just tell me what happened in 2020. It changed my death. I don't want to die not knowing why all this happened to me and why I was chosen.'

Now Prithvi was looking into the old, hopeful eyes of Mrs Batra looking back at him. He took a deep breath and started to narrate . . .

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Chapter 1
Unidentified Journey

It was one of those rare days during summer when the sun didn’t shine at its brightest. The blue sky and the early morning breeze were refreshing. The sound of a chopper was enough to break the silence of the surroundings. In this picture-perfect scenario lay a man in the helicopter, unconscious and oblivious. Four well-built gunmen had set their eyes on him, as if they had been waiting since eternity for the man to open his eyes. The man’s face was painted white and he had an unevenly grown beard and moustache. His long, black, dishevelled hair added to his mysterious look. For a forty-year-old, he appeared quite young. His face was ethereally carved, his skin so clear and luminous that it formed an aura of beauty around him. His body showed signs of motion to the sound of the helicopter’s thrust. And at times, when he moved, his body shed ashes into the air. His unconsciousness didn’t stop people around him from wondering who he was. This man aroused curiosity and awe in everyone who saw him.

The pilot announced, ‘11.6755 degree North, 92.7626 degree East; Landing at Ross Island in three minutes.’ Ross Island happened to be the most aesthetic piece of land in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, about 2 km east of Port

Blair. It beckoned one to take in the serenity of nature's finest gifts with the inheritance of rare yet significant species. Adorning the island was a dome-shaped high-tech facility.

Built purely for the purpose of research on the isolated land, the magnificent structure could leave even the greatest sceptics awestruck. Equipped with the latest technology, the facility boasted state-of-the-art coastal and marine monitoring systems. Constructed using only glass, the facility exploited surface technology to its best. Each screen one touched started talking to them as if it were part of an advanced species, altering the temperature and atmospheric pressure around them, thus making life easier in ways unimagined.

As brilliant as it was in these aspects, it was even more so when it came to security. Motion sensor cameras were installed in each corner of the arched roof. No one was ever alone inside the dome. A digital eye accompanied people wherever they went.

Veerbhadra, a voluntarily retired former Indian army brigadier, left his station and walked straight towards the dome's lobby. As soon as he entered, he spotted the captive surrounded by four armed guards. They were dragging his handcuffed and blindfolded insentient body through the corridor. His bare feet continued to leave traces of ashes on the floor. He is 'The Man', thought Veerbhadra. The detainee was wearing minimal clothes; only a short and narrow loincloth covered his lower abdomen. His body was smeared with ashes. A rosary made of *rudraksha* seeds hung around his neck. Half of his matted hair was rolled up into a topknot and adorned with a rusted iron trident.

Veerbhadra had come to this place as the security chief with a team of twenty-one, including gunmen and guards.

He was there on a mission. Being the finest of the men that his cult possessed, he was summoned for various missions, confidential or public, by various organizations throughout the world. But this one was different from the others.

Veerbhadra was 6 feet tall. He had lived well past the common life expectancy of forty years, a substantial part of it devoted to the army. His face was that of an average man, not particularly well-featured. His dusky skin, with his salt-and-pepper military haircut, added to his rough look. Some bruises and scars on both his hands, not very old, pointed to the battles he fought and their intensities. His hard muscular body was evident under his black jeans, white T-shirt and brown leather jacket. His eyes were masked by black aviator glares. He was always aware of his pistol, concealed at his waist inside the jacket, no matter what the situation at hand.

He ordered one of the guards to unmask the man and free his hands. He took off his glares. A scar parallel to his right eye was now in view and his jet-black eyes were set upon the man before him. Veerbhadra stood amazed for a moment.

Veerbhadra and his boss had been waiting for this man, though he didn’t know precisely why. All he knew was that the man they were searching for had been found and was to be interrogated. Interrogated about what, he didn’t know, but was sure that it was something serious. His impatience was at its peak; he wanted to know the whole story. He deserved to stand in the innermost circle. If not, why had he been summoned at all?

He had worked with the most powerful of men and knew their ways well. However, his new high command was strange. He had been anxious about everything, but still managed to keep it a big secret.

‘Veerbhadra!’ He nearly jumped when his name echoed in a familiar voice in the lobby. It was Dr Srinivasan, his boss. ‘Yes sir,’ he replied.

The man Veerbhadra answered to was 4 feet and 8 inches tall, about sixty-five years old. His lips were dark brownish, which revealed that he was a chronic smoker. His white hair covered only part of his scalp. Another aspect that revealed his age was his dowdy appearance. Dr Srinivasan had donned a brown matte suit with a white shirt beneath it. A broad red tie hung loose from his collar. He also wore obsolete black square-framed glasses over his eyes, with a string that hung low from the two edges and went around his neck.

Dr Srinivasan’s appearance was comical, but his eyes brimmed with discipline. His conduct could command the attention of even the topmost officials. He was a boss by default. He could give everyone a sense of being a subordinate in his presence. He was funny only as long as he was quiet. It could be easily concluded that he was a no-nonsense man and highly dedicated to his work.

Dr Srinivasan was followed by another man, Dr Batra. He introduced Dr Batra to Veerbhadra and vice versa. They shook hands. Dr Batra was Dr Srinivasan’s colleague, or so it seemed to Veerbhadra.

Veerbhadra took him to be a not-so-jovial kind of man. He wore a grumpy look and seemed infuriated. He looked even more educated than Dr Srinivasan. His eyes were those of an intellectual.

Dr Batra was a tall, fair man of around fifty years of age and belonged to the Sikh community. He had brown eyes and a chubby face. He wore a formal maroon shirt and black trousers that went well with his black leather shoes. Most of the fat in his body was accumulated around his abdomen.

His beard and moustache were trimmed stylishly. He wore a metallic *kada* (bangle) on his right wrist and a classic watch with Roman numerals on the left.

‘Is he the one?’ asked Dr Srinivasan in his heavy voice and south Indian accent.

‘*Aaunu*, sir,’ replied Veerbhadra in Telegu and rectified it immediately. ‘I mean, yes, sir.’

‘So who are we waiting for? Take him to the interrogation room.’

The guards followed Veerbhadra, dragging the captive and holding their positions around him. They entered an L-shaped corridor. Dr Srinivasan walked straight ahead and Veerbhadra followed him. The passage was sandwiched between a plain wall on the left and a few doors on the right with a dead end ahead, preceded by a sharp left. They reached the dead end of the wall, guarded by two men.

Veerbhadra was still unaware what this man was being interrogated about.

The room that they entered was about 12 feet high and done up in the same posh and ritzy decor as the rest of the dome. A chair crafted out of stainless steel, with a footrest affixed to it, iron rods serving as its backrest, a black leather seat and handcuffs integrated into the armrests, happened to be the only furniture in the room. It was a laboratory, or so it seemed. Surrounding the chair were a number of polished wooden tables. Each table had a computer screen on it.

The facility also had a projector hanging from the ceiling and a white screen was nailed to the wall opposite the projector. The captive would sit in the centre and the interrogator would debrief him, digging out answers by hook or by crook.

The man was dragged, pushed into the central seat and tied to it by the guards using the available provisions. His waist, head and legs were fastened to the chair using leather belts. His fingers were now the only movable parts of his body.

Meanwhile, Veerbhadra was sitting silently observing the cameras. He could sense that not only the captive, but everyone else present in the room was also being watched.

It was around 11 a.m. when the man slowly started regaining consciousness. His eyes were still closed but he could feel that someone was cleaning the white paint on his face using wet tissues. He overheard someone talking about him. The conversation was about his identity as an Aghori. ‘He looks so weird. What kind of an unpleasing look is this?’ exclaimed a girl. ‘I know who he is,’ replied a confident male voice. ‘Before introducing this weirdo . . . first things first . . . who are you?’ asked the girl.

‘Abhilash,’ the man replied instantly.

‘And how do you know him?’ the girl asked.

‘I don’t know him or who he is. I know what he is. He is an Aghori.’

‘Aghori?’ asked the girl in surprise, as if she had heard the word for the first time.

‘Aghori. The word in itself is enough to send shivers down the spine. There are stories about Aghoris in each and every hamlet of India and Nepal. It is said that they possess unlimited powers over nature, can conquer death, materialize objects, eat human flesh and faeces and live in extreme impurity, sometimes totally naked.

‘Aghoris even indulge in macabre practices like mating with corpses in their urge to obliterate any duality even between pure and impure and to achieve the non-dual state of mind. They obsessively indulge in the ugly, the impure,

and in social taboos in the process of their self-discovery. They drink alcohol, take drugs and eat meat. Nothing is considered taboo. But the thing that makes their ancient traditions bizarre is that their temples are cremation grounds. Their clothing comes from the dead, firewood from the funeral pyres and food from the river. When a person is cremated, they coat themselves in the ashes of the dead and meditate on the dead. Aghoris survive by begging with bowls made from human skulls. Still, the most shocking aspect of the Aghori life remains their cannibalism. The corpses, which may either be pulled from a river (like the Ganga) or obtained from cremation grounds, are consumed both raw and cooked on an open flame, as the Aghoris believe that what others consider a “dead man” is, in fact, nothing but natural matter devoid of the life force it once contained. Therefore, while for ordinary folks cannibalism may be seen as primitive, barbaric and unclean, for Aghoris, it’s being both resourceful and subverting the common stereotypes placed on such taboos into a spiritual ascertainment that indeed, nothing is profane or separate from God, who is hailed to be all and in all. In fact, the Aghoris see it as a scientific approach towards trying to discover how matter converts from one form to another.

‘One may find many Aghoris walking the streets of northern India with their skull cups. They let their hair grow to great lengths without ever bothering about the need to cut it. They follow the pure, non-discriminatory path of using the body to conquer fear and prejudices, and to achieve the ultimate state of non-duality. Now, for centuries, they have been mesmerizing people around the globe with their eerie and mysterious lifestyle.

‘While tracing the history of Aghoris, one may find that the very first Aghori, who laid down the foundation of the

lives of future Aghoris, was Kina Ram. According to urban legend, he lived up to 150 years and died during the second half of the eighteenth century.

‘Aghoris believe that Shiva is absolute and omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. According to them, whatever happens in this universe happens because of Shiva. Among the female deities, Kali is the most sacred form for them.’

Another voice intervened in the conversation. This time, the voice was too close to the man. It was Dr Batra joining the conversation, saying, ‘Aghoris claim that they have the cure for the deadliest of diseases that we have today, even AIDS and cancer. These medicines, which they refer to as “Human oils”, are collected from the burning pyre after a dead body is cremated. Although they have not been tested scientifically, according to Aghoris, they are highly effective.’ The captive could feel that Dr Batra, while shedding the light of his knowledge on Aghoris, was injecting a syringe into his hand.

‘From snow-clad mountains and hot deserts to tiger-infested jungles, Aghoris are known to live in places where no other human beings are known to survive.’

Abhilash took it further, ‘For Aghoris, nothing is impure or nasty or filthy. According to them, if you are able to concentrate on God even while doing the most perverted acts, then you reach unison with God. That would take the guts out of the majority of the population: to meditate sitting on a corpse in a cemetery.

‘Aghoris believe that everyone is born an Aghori. A newborn child doesn’t distinguish between his faeces, dirt and toys and plays with everything. It starts distinguishing among them only after its parents and society tell it to do so. As the child grows up and makes choices on a

materialistic basis, only then does she or he lose the traits of an Aghori.

‘They believe having sex in the midst of dead bodies gives rise to supernatural powers. The women partners are also smeared in the ashes of the dead and the sexual act takes place while drums are beaten and mantras chanted. They make sure that no women are forced to have sex with them and also that the women are menstruating while the act goes on. Now, when you practise cannibalism in a city like Varanasi, where even eating non-vegetarian food is still frowned upon, you know you bring trouble upon yourself. But surprisingly, even after consuming human meat in public, no particular action is taken against them. This might be because they eat dead human flesh and do not kill anyone to eat them. Pure Aghoris are innocent, lovely, ever-kind, merciful and bless you whenever you seek them out. They spend most of their time in meditation, chanting “Om Namah Sivaya”.’

The word ‘Om’ echoed in the man’s ears and he slowly opened his eyes.

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Chapter 2
Inconclusive Inception

The door slid open and a lady walked in. She introduced herself to the team as Dr Shahista. She was a prominent psychiatrist who had been awarded and applauded for her significant work in the field of hypnotism and had received funding for her research. She was appointed by and for the government as and when needed.

She had been called from Pune, Maharashtra, her home town. She was in her mid-forties. Five-and-a-half feet tall, Dr Shahista was beautiful, fair-complexioned and elegant. She bore honour and pride in her personality and an aura of optimism surrounded her. Copper-brown hair hung freely past her waist. She never forgot to wear an amiable smile. Apart from that, she wore a black embroidered kurti, a cream Patiala salwar, a black printed dupatta across her shoulders (a traditional Indian ensemble) and a pair of traditional *jootiyaan* (handcrafted leather shoes).

God has not seen it fit to distribute evenly the gifts of beauty and brains. However, Dr Shahista possessed both. *Cap-a-pie*, she was adorned with varying jewel stones worn for all sorts of peace and fulfilment. She had a *tabeez* (an amulet or locket containing holy verses) fastened on her left bicep, two golden bangles on the other hand, a thin golden

chain around her neck and a few rings with embedded stones affixed on her fingers.

The man was still tied to the same chair, but the faces around him were none he had seen before. The dull silhouette of each person seated behind the encircling tables was all that he could make out, apart from an intense fog farther away, starting from the tip of his nose. He was subconsciously awake.

He was not mentally present because of a concentrated narcotic drug that he had been compelled to take down his nostrils. His vision blurred as he tried to regain his senses.

After meeting her colleagues, Dr Shahista took over and sat right in front of the captive. From the way he flinched before his eyes got fully accustomed to the light, it was evident that the man had stayed in the dark for quite a long time. He saw her and suddenly found that she was staring him in the eyes. Her eyes were intense and deep, a hue of sea blue. They seemed to possess the power of hypnotism. Something about this man told her that he also held a secret of his own. At the same time, she realized that even when the man had been given the highest degree of drugs, no wave of fear or worry once crossed his face. He seemed like a man of courage and confidence.

All said and done, the interrogation was now to commence.

Before she could say anything, in an unperturbed tone and gesture, the man intervened and said, ‘Om Shastri’, introducing himself. Dr Shahista wouldn’t have been dismayed had this man tried to free himself and scream, which was quite routine for Shahista. However, his calmness left her confused and she looked at Dr Srinivasan. The man also turned his head in the direction where Shahista’s eyes were stuck. The Aghori had to peep a little farther to catch a

clearer glimpse of Dr Srinivasan. As soon as he did that, his eyes widened and he almost screamed, ‘Chinna?’ All the heads turned towards the sound, astonished. ‘What?’ asked Dr Batra in his throaty voice, confused.

The man continued looking at Dr Srinivasan as if he was seeing him after a very long time.

Dr Srinivasan was offended; he felt he was being mocked.

Veerbhadra too was astonished by the incident. He had never met a man like this.

All of a sudden, a palm with a piece of cotton covered Om Shastri’s nose from behind. The smell from the cotton was nauseating.

He was falling into a well of silence. No thoughts, no feelings, all voices muted . . . The man did not realize that he was being hypnotized.

‘Who are you?’ Dr Shahista asked the captive.

‘Om Shastri,’ he replied in a state of trance. ‘We know that, Mr Shastri,’ Dr Shahista affirmed. ‘Tell us what we don’t know,’ she continued. ‘You don’t know anything,’ murmured Om Shastri.

‘Yes, Mr Shastri. We don’t know things, which is why you are here, but the one thing that we know for sure is that this isn’t your real name.

‘What is your real name?’ repeated Dr Shahista. ‘I don’t remember,’ said Om Shastri in a feeble voice.

An unusual answer from a hypnotized person, thought Dr Shahista.

Sitting on one of the chairs, with a mythological book in his hands, Abhilash said, ‘Liar.’

‘He cannot lie,’ Dr Batra countered. ‘He has been injected with the narco analysis drugs.’ Dr Batra was clearly frustrated.

‘Narco!’ said Abhilash like it was French to a Greek and continued looking at Dr Batra for a reply.

‘It’s a truth serum. One cannot lie after taking it,’ said Dr Batra curtly, showing no interest in the explanation.

Dr Tej Batra was a sincere and mature person. He was driven only by logic and intelligence. A bit quick-tempered, Dr Batra was at times a little unpredictable. Rarely did situations lift his mood and make him happy.

‘And above that, he is hypnotized,’ intruded Dr Shahista, in firm agreement with Dr Batra.

Both of them looked at Abhilash, expecting surrender. Abhilash shrugged and whispered, ‘There are things beyond medical science,’ and continued reading his book.

Abhilash had spent the thirty years of his life with his head in Hindu mythology books, so his knowledge on the subject was boundless. Being a descendant of a Brahmin family of Raj Purohits (administrative priests) in a small town called Ambikapur, his family was treated like gods, driven by people’s superstitious beliefs. Honoured with the highest forms of respect and prestige, he had a massive ego that reflected in his attitude. Criticizing others for their mistakes was in his blood.

He was 5 feet and 8 inches tall, dark-complexioned with a plump physique. He was wearing an ill-fitting white kurta paired with blue jeans, unaware of his belly showing.

Abhilash was a staunch believer in myths and superstitions and his appearance proved it. He had put on various rings with various stones for various purposes. He never failed to give his advice on which stone to trust in a particular problem, even if he hadn’t been asked for it. A *raksha sootra* (protective strand of cotton) was tied to his left wrist, his neck carried a rudraksha (the seed of a plant believed to be a shield against bad luck and ill health)

string. His forehead had a U-shaped sandalwood tilak traced on it and he wore Kolhapuri chappals (slippers) on his feet. He carried an old-fashioned jute bag on one of his shoulders and it contained a few books on Hindu mantras (verses).

‘Tell us whatever you remember, Mr Shastri,’ said Shahista, coming back to the point.

Om Shastri’s face reflected a myriad of expressions—smiling, calm, tense and afraid—rapidly changing as he spoke.

‘I remember Banda Bahadur,’ Om Shastri uttered with his eyes closed.

Dr Batra looked surprised by that name, as if he too knew Banda Bahadur.

‘Who is he?’ Abhilash demanded. ‘My general,’ said Shastri. ‘Is he also a part of your team?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where is he now?’

‘He is dead.’

‘How did he die?’

‘He was killed.’

‘Who killed him?’

‘Farukh Siyar did.’

‘Who else can you recall?’

‘Sanjay !’

‘Who Sanjay? Sanjay Dutt? Sanjay Suri? Or Sanjay Leela Bhansali?’ retorted Abhilash in a sarcastic tone.

The girl who had questioned Abhilash about the Aghori guffawed. LSD: Lisa Samuel D’Costa. A professional hacker, LSD was involved in frequent online forgery and bank account seizures. At the young age of 25 she had caught the attention of the Indian Cyber Cell, but she wasn’t in the least bothered about that. She had all the expertise without a degree. LSD was a beautiful girl, raw and unpolished in

her mannerisms, smart and intelligent in her work. She had an offhanded outlook towards everything but her job.

‘Could be Sanjay Manjrekar,’ LSD chuckled.

LSD played it fast and loose. Her tongue was seldom in her power. She had a face anyone could read instantly and know her random thoughts. LSD had come to this place from a small town, which had a significant impact on her language being accented but unimpressive.

She had black, wavy hair. Her eyes were almond brown. She wore a floral white dress with lots of accessories and a bold black frame, with her bright, high heels showing off her toned legs. She’d put on a couple of contrast bands and bracelets around her wrists and an axe pendant hung around her neck. ‘Sanjay! The son of Gavalgan,’ said Om Shastri.

‘And how do you know him?’ Shahista asked.

‘Sanjay was the one who guided Dhritarashtra, king of Hastinapur, during the war,’ Om replied.

‘I met him at that time as I was the prime minister of Hastinapur and my name was Vidur,’ he continued.

Abhilash at once started pondering over the names and spoke slowly as he did so.

‘I’ve heard this name before.’

‘Anyway,’ Shahista wanted to proceed.

‘You don’t get it. He is claiming to be alive during the time of the Mahabharata,’ Abhilash retorted.

‘Do you want me to believe in all his mythological nonsense?’

‘This isn’t nonsense . . . you–’

Before Abhilash could complete his statement, Shahista threw another question on Om.

‘What other names do you have, Mr Shastri?’

‘Sushen,’ Om Shastri replied as a smile crossed his face.

‘What did you do as him?’ Shahista emphasized.

‘I worked as a vaidya (a person who makes herbal medicines and cures the diseases of common people).’

‘Is that it or did you use any other names?’ Shahista probed. ‘I was also Vishnu Gupt once,’ he replied.

Shahista rolled her eyes at yet another name and threw her arms in the air.

‘And what did you do as this Vishnu Gupt?’ she asked with a bewildered expression.

Om Shastri started mumbling something that everyone found hard to comprehend.

व्याघ्रीव तष्ठितजिरा परतिर्जयन्ती
रोगाश्च शत्रव इव प्रहरन्त देहम्।
आयुः परस्वितभिन्निघटादविम्भः
लोकस्तथाप्यहतिमाचरतीतचित्रम्।।

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Chapter 3
Disconnected Disclosure

‘I don’t understand what this man is saying!’ shouted Shahista, clearly frustrated.

Om Shastri was silent for a moment and then, without warning, woke up from his narcotic stupor. His sudden return to consciousness shocked the team members, who thought they had ample time to deal with him. Shahista, who was sitting closest to Om Shastri, got alarmed and, while trying to distance herself from him, fell off the chair in surprise. All the others in the room stiffened. Shahista’s rational mind argued that this was impossible: *It’s not been even an hour. How did he get conscious?* Never in her experience of over three hundred patients had a man woken up from his hypnotism so abruptly, without any sign of physical disturbance.

Dr Batra was equally stunned and disoriented. His knowledge of medicines told him that the patient could not regain consciousness in less than eight hours of the injection, given the dose. It had not even been an hour since Om was injected. This defied all the norms ever studied and practised by Dr Batra. LSD was horrified too and was bad at hiding it. None of them had any clue what was going on.

Om Shastri was looking at them without trying to get free of the shackles that constrained him.

When he spoke, his tone was calm and peaceful. ‘Why have I been brought here? What do you people want?’ He seemed disappointed.

Dr Shahista didn’t respond to Om Shastri’s inquiry. She looked over to Dr Srinivasan across the room. Om also turned towards him.

‘You are here because there are some answers we need. What do we want? Nothing but the information you possess,’ said Dr Srinivasan in his bossy tone.

‘How much do you know about me?’ Om continued.

‘Well, Mr Shastri, not much for now. Just that Om Shastri’s not the real you, that you know someone called Banda Bahadur and Sanjay, and that you were Vidur and Vishnu Gupt: other fake names you used.’

Om Shastri shut his eyes tightly and a wave of pain and sorrow crossed his face. At this point, Dr Srinivasan, losing his cool, said in an authoritative tone, ‘I am Dr Srinivasan Rao, a retired scientist from the National Institute of Science Communication and Information Resources. I am now leading this group.’

‘I know who you are,’ responded Om.

Dr Batra moved close to Om to inject him again.

Om tried resisting initially and let out a scream. ‘I am immune to midazolam, flunitrazepam, barbiturates and amobarbital. This won’t help you.’ These were Om’s last words before losing consciousness again. Om’s scream brought two guards running to hold him in place.

Dr Batra concealed his astonishment on hearing the names of the drugs that constituted the narcotic mixture and injected him once more. Om started feeling sleepy. Dr Shahista started in the direction of Om Shastri to get on

with hypnotizing him. She sat comfortably in front of him and stared him in the eye. Shahista's beautiful eyes had the magic and the power to hypnotize any person. She didn't blink at all and spoke in a soothing voice. When she touched Om Shastri on the shoulder, he felt limp and heavy. Dr Srinivasan registered these odd words in his mind, 'I know who you are'. *How*, Dr Srinivasan wondered. 'Tej, is he ready to be questioned again?' Dr Srinivasan inquired.

Dr Batra checked some readings in a device and said, 'Not yet, sir.'

Meanwhile, LSD approached other teammates, asking, 'What was he babbling?'

'Sa . . . nskrit,' said Parimal.

Parimal, aged 35, hailed from a village called Wardha in Maharashtra, where his father worked as a farmer. He was an introvert. He did his PhD in Indian history. His knowledge in his subject was immeasurable but he lacked the guts to put it forth confidently. The reason for his lack of confidence was his stammering, which had been his biggest hurdle in keeping up with others and so, he was often ignored. As a consequence of his silence, his presence and his absence were indistinguishable.

Parimal was two inches short of six feet, creamy-skinned, and handsome. He wore a checked brown shirt with a pair of black jeans and white sport shoes. He had coal-black eyes and hair in the same hue with some oil applied to it.

Parimal was denied the importance he desired in the team, owing to the fact that his questions and suggestions were considered naïve. 'Sanskrit! Who speaks Sanskrit in this century?' LSD remarked in frustration.

'He!' said Parimal, pointing towards Om Shastri.

'Yeah, but who in today's world has the time to understand his language?' wondered LSD.

‘Me!’ came the answer from Parimal again.

‘Sushen!’ said Abhilash to himself slowly.

‘What?’ asked LSD after overhearing Abhilash.

‘Nothing,’ said Abhilash, bringing himself back.

LSD insisted. ‘No. I heard you repeat the name this guy said minutes ago.’

Abhilash replied, ‘Sushen.’

‘Yeah, that name. What is it? Tell me,’ LSD insisted. Parimal too joined the conversation.

‘Sushen is a very rarely used name. As per my knowledge, Sushen was the name of a medic in the Ramayana who saved Lakshman, the younger brother of Lord Ram, in the battle with Ravana, the king of Lanka, by suggesting a herb called *sanjeevani* which was found only in the Himalayas. Lord Hanuman was ordered by Lord Ram to bring sanjeevani, as advised by Sushen. Lord Hanuman, after reaching the Himalayas, could not make out the difference between sanjeevani and other herbs, and so he lifted the entire mountain and flew back to Kanyakumari with it to let Sushen himself make the choice.’

‘Yes! I have seen the Hindu mythological picture of Hanuman flying with the mountain. Is that what you are referring to?’

‘Yes! But I don’t remember the mention of Sushen’s end in the Ramayana,’ said Abhilash.

‘Everything is unusual about him. Not even close to anything I have witnessed before,’ Dr Shahista said, still lost in thought.

She then turned to Dr Srinivasan and asked politely, ‘Sir, we should at least clearly know what we are dealing with.’

Everyone looked at Srinivasan, expecting a fair answer.

‘This is what you are here for,’ retaliated their boss. ‘So concentrate on your work and get more out of him to help

us understand what we are dealing with.’ Dr Srinivasan glared at Shahista.

That was rude and Shahista didn’t like it, as was evident from her expression. Everyone went back to the task at hand.

Parimal walked to Dr Batra and asked frantically, ‘Dr Batra! A . . . a . . . are you a . . . a . . . alright?’

Dr Batra was clearly disturbed. He gathered himself and came up with, ‘Huh? Yes? Yes.’

‘We a . . . a . . . are not very well a . . . a . . . cquainted. But we a . . . are to work a . . . as a team here. You seem a bit disoriented. Is everything a . . . all right?’ Parimal repeated in an anxious tone.

Dr Batra felt comforted by this kind gesture and whispered into Parimal’s ears, ‘This man woke up within an hour!’

‘So?’ Parimal was confused.

‘How could he? That’s not possible!’ Dr Batra exclaimed with his eyes wide.

‘Not possible? What do you mean? We a . . . all saw him wake up!’ Parimal went on with his innocent queries.

‘Exactly! That is what’s bothering me, Parimal. A single dose of that drug takes a man down for four to five hours at the least. You know what? He didn’t lose his consciousness after one dose! Then I increased it to twice the normal measure. He went dizzy for a while but was still awake. I gave him one more round. A dose of that kind is more than enough to kill a man. And he managed to regain his wits within an hour!’ Dr Batra went on explaining.

‘This is a question mark on my knowledge and calibre. I need to find out how he did that,’ said the determined Dr Batra.

Whatever Dr Batra said didn't register on the radar of Parimal's brain and so he got out of it with, 'Did you tell this to Dr Sriniv . . . asan?'

'Yes, I did. Perhaps Dr Srinivasan knows things we aren't aware of. When Om Shastri saw Dr Srinivasan, he called by his nickname, Chinna!'

'How did he k . . . know it?' Parimal was shocked.

'That's the point. How on earth could he know it?'

'A man who knows Dr S . . . rinivasan's nick . . . name and claims he doesn't remember his own n . . . ame?'

'Are you on a mission?' Shahista was all ears again.

'Yes,' Om Shastri nodded.

Everyone's face went pale.

The deep lines on Dr Srinivasan's forehead revealed the nature of his thoughts.

LSD grew a bit tense thinking about interrogating a terrorist who was being given such importance that people who were the best in different walks of life had been brought together here, in this isolated facility. Dr Shahista was equally frightened for once.

'I knew it! He is a Muslim. He looks like one!' snapped the proud Abhilash. He had the habit of discriminating against people on the basis of caste and religion. Shahista chose to ignore him and went on.

'What is your mission?'

'Hide and be hidden.'

'Hide what?'

'My belongings.'

'Where do you secure it?'

'In my memories . . . and in a locker.'

'Who do you protect it for?'

'For this mankind,' Om said with a heavenly smile on his lips.

Without being questioned further, Om breathed, ‘No, I am not a terrorist.’

Shahista had lost her patience. She turned towards everyone else and discovered they were in the same boat, equally jolted. Dr Srinivasan was on the phone talking to someone. He saw Shahista’s face and hung up before snapping, ‘What happened?’

‘I didn’t put up a question and still he spoke! Who on earth asked him about being a terrorist?’ cried Shahista, clearly taken aback.

‘Lisa Samuel D’Costa,’ Om replied.

‘I was talking to Parimal about the possibility of him being a terrorist. But I wasn’t loud,’ admitted LSD.

Parimal nodded in agreement.

‘How come he heard you and not me?’ Shahista’s face grew serious with contemplation.

LSD didn’t know what to say, so she kept quiet for once.

It was already past noon when Om Shastri broke the spell yet again. Veerbhadra looked at his watch and noted it was 1.45 p.m. He went outside the room to inspect the guards. Meanwhile, in the room, Om locked his eyes with the fear-stricken Dr Shahista and spoke to her like a father to his daughter: ‘You don’t have to do this to get your answers. I am in your custody. You may tackle me as you wish. Go ahead without terror on your face. I will not harm anyone. And I never did. Trust me, I’ll cooperate.’

Shahista was at a loss for words.

Dr Batra crossed the room towards Dr Srinivasan and said, ‘I need your permission to diagnose him, sir.’ He was more than agitated.

Dr Srinivasan didn’t take any initiative to help Dr Batra. He was preoccupied with his own work.

Shahista left Om and walked towards the group.

‘Yes, Shahista?’ inquired Dr Srinivasan on seeing her approach.

‘Sir, I suggest we try interrogating him without the drugs and hypnotism for once,’ Shahista pleaded.

Dr Batra seemed ridiculed by Shahista’s request but chose to remain silent.

‘We may do that. Are you to take the responsibility of authenticating his words? Is it ensured that only the truth is spoken?’ the adamant Dr Srinivasan concluded.

‘But this is not helping either,’ Dr Shahista reasoned.

‘Please let me diagnose him once, sir. I want a sample of his blood,’ Dr Batra appealed.

‘He is not a lab rat that you can research on, Tej. I cannot allow you that privilege,’ was all Dr Batra got from his high command.

Dr Batra and Shahista looked at each other with an expression that said, ‘We are in the same boat.’

With a deep sigh, Shahista said, ‘Okay, sir. Then what do we have to do now?’

Dr Srinivasan’s phone rang. He took it out from his pocket, saw the caller’s identity, and grew a bit nervous.

‘All of you take a short break and thereafter prepare for the next session,’ said Dr Srinivasan in haste, before attending the call. He strode past them out of the room.

With Dr Srinivasan’s departure came some relaxation in the atmosphere. A smile swept across LSD’s face instantly.

Parimal looked in Abhilash’s direction and then towards LSD. Dr Batra was still having a hard time without his answers and that was troubling him. Likewise, Dr Shahista had her gaze on Om Shastri, who was keenly observing the room around him and the people inside it. When he looked at Shahista, she turned away. That instant, the security chief, Veerbhadra, entered the room with two other guards.

He echoed in a heavy voice, ‘Everyone! This way please,’ and showed them the door with a wave of his hand. All of them took a couple of minutes to leave the room. Veerbhadra and Om Shastri were to be alone in the room for an hour.

The next room was occupied by the investigators. Dr Batra was speaking to his family in his native tongue. Parimal, LSD and Abhilash were sitting comfortably around a wooden table. Dr Shahista chose to be alone for the time being. She sat at another table, scribbling something in a diary.

Parimal was struggling with his words, LSD with her wires and Abhilash with his pride. They were engaged in a conversation, talking about their careers and themselves.

‘Why don’t you join us, Dr Shahista? Let’s get to know each other a bit,’ LSD invited.

‘Sure! I’ll be there in five minutes,’ replied the congenial woman.

Since Shahista was senior to them, she knew all about them through their files. She had joined the crew knowing whom she would be working with, but not for how long. She came and sat on the empty seat beside Abhilash. As Dr Shahista got seated, Abhilash stood up and went to the other side, changing his seat with Parimal. Everyone noticed the discrimination and felt its sting, but no one said anything.

Dr Shahista was embarrassed.

Dr Batra was still on his phone.

‘What’s that diary all about?’ asked LSD bluntly, pointing towards the diary in Shahista’s hands.

‘I am just keeping track of all the usual and unusual happenings of the interrogation. Proves to be beneficial for the case study later,’ replied Shahista with her calm smile.

‘Wh . . . at unusual ha . . . appenings?‘ Parimal inquired in his typical manner.

‘You see, he doesn’t ask the usual questions. When he wakes up, he asks worriedly about what and who we are and so on as if he already knew in his heart that he is going to be caught someday.’

‘M . . . aybe he had experienced this before. M . . . aybe he knows wh . . . at we are looking for,’ Parimal proposed.

‘Even we aren’t fortunate enough to know what we are looking for from him,’ Shahista said in a disgusted tone.

‘Wha . . . t other unusual tra . . . aits does he s . . . s . . . show?’ Parimal stammered.

‘He breaks the spell I cast upon him without any prior sign of breaking it. It’s a swift process. As if he was normally sleeping. Snap! And he wakes up,’ Shahista explained with a click of her fingers.

‘Dr Ba . . . atra is also more than concerned a . . . about his a-a . . . bility to overcome the effect of his drugs, which usua . . . ally lasts several hours,’ Parimal remarked.

‘I personally dread Dr Batra’s presence. Wonder why he is always infuriated and worked up!’ admitted LSD.

‘Dr Batra is a nice man. He is crawling alone through the shadows. That’s all,’ Shahista explained.

‘Oh! Do you know him personally?’ LSD kept on.

‘Yes. We have worked together earlier.’

‘So? What’s troubling him?’

‘He is not his usual self. Actually, he is a bit down in the dumps because his wife is on her deathbed. Though he is a renowned doctor, there is not much he can do about it. That’s the reason for his disappointment,’ said Shahista in an empathetic voice.

LSD criticized herself for not trying to understand a situation before forming an opinion about it. And at the

same time, she envied Shahista for being able to do the same thing so easily.

There was silence for a while as Shahista pondered over the mental agony which Dr Batra might be suffering.

A wise man comes out of a difficult time wiser than before. Dr Batra is a wise man indeed, thought Shahista.

'Parimal, what did Om Shastri say in Sanskrit?' asked Shahista, changing the subject.

Parimal replied, 'It was a sloka (verse). I didn't fully understand it, but I think he was talking about man's life shrinking with the smooth and speedy passage of time, and he wondered something. I couldn't take it in as he spoke it in a voice too weak to reach me. But if I could hear it once more, I could tell you the exact translation.'

'I can do that easily. I can make him repeat it,' informed Shahista confidently.

'We must record it all for the future. Shouldn't we?' suggested LSD.

'What! A . . . a aren't we recording it a . . . already?' Parimal's surprise was evident in his eyes.

At that moment, Dr Batra joined in and sat with his head in his palms.

'No,' replied Shahista.

'Why not?' Parimal was shocked beyond explanation.

'Because Dr Srinivasan does not want anything to be recorded,' Dr Batra interjected.

'And we a . . . are fol . . . lowing that?' Parimal ceased being respectful.

'Yes. Because he is the boss,' LSD said, rolling her eyes.

'I don't think he is,' Abhilash contemplated.

'What do you mean?' LSD asked.

Dr Batra and Shahista exchanged glances and before anyone could pay heed to Abhilash's intuition, Dr Batra

interrupted with, ‘LSD, could you get me some information about someone?’

‘Sir, with the equipment and devices I am provided with in here, I can give you practically any information about anyone: their account numbers, passwords, emails, places visited, current location, phone numbers, personal details . . . every piece of data since they were born,’ replied LSD confidently as her eyes shone.

‘Okay, then. Dig up everything you can about this man, Om Shastri,’ said Dr Batra with a hint of satisfaction.

Om and Veerbhadra had been together in the room for quite some time. Om was tied up as earlier, with no change in his position, and Veerbhadra was sitting idle at one of the tables. Om Shastri finally broke the silence, saying, ‘Can I get a glass of water, Mr Veerbhadra?’ His voice was husky, Veerbhadra noticed. Maybe because of his dry throat, he thought.

‘Get him a glass of water,’ he ordered one of the guards without moving at all.

‘So, for how long have you been working here?’ Om tried to start up a conversation.

‘It’s been a while,’ came the flat and rude reply from Veerbhadra. Om inhaled deeply and started smiling. ‘What do you smile at?’ Veerbhadra asked, irritated.

‘It’s going to rain soon. And I love the smell and the sound of it,’ replied Om Shastri, his gaze set upon the minimal sky visible through the ventilator.

He then gulped down the water he got from the guard.

‘Rain? Now? It’s summer! Have you lost it?’ Veerbhadra responded.

Veerbhadra heard many footsteps in the corridor. He left the room again when everyone else entered. And within a few seconds, everyone was back at their original positions in

the room. LSD was chirping with enthusiasm as she finally had something to work on. Abhilash continuously stared at Om Shastri, his expression unreadable. Om Shastri stared back. Dr Batra was prepared for another session. Suddenly, he remembered having missed something.

He went over to LSD and said in a hushed voice, ‘Om had also mentioned a locker where he keeps his information safe. Do check about that too.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said LSD.

Dr Srinivasan was back in the lab. He began by scrutinizing it for the presence of all the team members. Dr Shahista was absent.

‘Abhilash!’ called out Dr Srinivasan. ‘Look for Dr Shahista and ask her to get here.’

Abhilash nodded and went straight towards the door with a disgusted feeling, thinking, ‘Why me?’ He knew where he would find the lady. As expected, Dr Shahista was in the next room, keenly studying her notes.

‘You still here?’ Abhilash asked bluntly and reluctantly.

‘I was just going through the notes I had prepared. This might help in the next—’

‘Dr Srinivasan is expecting you,’ said Abhilash, cutting her off.

Shahista nodded.

Dr Shahista and Abhilash started walking together. Just before entering the lab, Shahista said in a strict yet gentle tone, ‘Abhilash, you know so much about Aghoris. Let me fill your knowledge gap with one more thing about them. Aghoris have a policy of no hatred towards any creature or thing. They believe that one who hates cannot meditate or reach moksha. We, who always look for reasons to hate others, whether based on religious views, skin colour, linguistic choices, political approaches, sexual orientation,

gender, race and whatnot, must learn from them. The bottom line of the story is that I treat people like people, and not on the basis of their religion, and I prefer to be treated in the same way. Am I clear?' Shahista's eyes had a penetrating gaze.

Abhilash understood her message and gave his assent in a nod.

As they entered the lab, they saw, halfway inside, Dr Batra talking to Dr Srinivasan.

'Sir, what will we do if he defies the medicines again?' Dr Batra was anxious. 'We'll see,' replied Dr Srinivasan. Dr Batra's words fell on deaf ears.

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Chapter 4
Names from History

Dr Srinivasan took the seat facing Om's back.

'Chinna, please don't do this. I am willing to cooperate in whatever you ask me.' Om Shastri was almost pleading, his gaze set towards the ceiling, signalling towards Dr Srinivasan, who in turn glanced in the direction of Dr Shahista and Dr Batra. Their faces conveyed the same wish.

'Please start,' ordered Dr Srinivasan, with antagonism and annoyance on his face as his ears were poked with the word 'Chinna'.

Om was sedated again and the interrogation was set in motion.

The first question was to be for Abhilash to pay attention to and translate the answer for the others.

'So, what did you advise as Vishnu Gupt?' began Shahista with the unconscious Om. Om repeated the same verse in Sanskrit.

व्याघ्रीव तष्ठितजिरा परतिर्जयन्ती
रोगाश्च शत्रव इव प्रहरन्त देहम्।
आयुः परस्वितभिन्नघटादविम्भः
लोकस्तथाप्यहतिमाचरतीतचित्रम्।।

Dr Shahista was looking at Abhilash, who gave her a thumbs up.

‘Who did you advise as Vishnu Gupt?’

‘Chandra Gupt Maurya.’

‘Why did you become Om Shastri?’

‘To hide my real identity.’

‘From?’

‘This world.’

‘What is your true identity?’ Shahista was more than capable of finding out hidden answers.

‘All my identities are true.’

She made a mental note of the line.

‘What were you doing as Om Shastri in Varanasi?’

‘Searching.’

‘Searching? For?’

‘Subhash Chandra Bose.’

All the colleagues looked at each other in surprise. Shahista didn’t know what to ask or say further. *This was getting even weirder*, she pondered. Finally, she took a deep breath and continued.

‘Subhash Chandra Bose is dead.’

‘No. He is not. He is just living under another name,’ said Om with a firm gesture.

‘Why do you think that Subhash Chandra Bose is not dead and is living under some other name?’ Shahista pressed on.

‘I don’t think so. I know so.’

‘What makes you believe that?’ she inquired.

‘Because I met him when I was Vidur,’ said Om.

Shahista rolled her eyes. *This was not a point to be argued*, she thought.

‘Why are you searching for him?’

The answer to this shook Abhilash. ‘Because he is Ashwatthama.’

‘Ashwa . . . What?’ Shahista didn’t get it.

Abhilash had started listening intently at the pronunciation of ‘Ashwatthama’ and thereafter, started walking towards Shahista. ‘Ashwatthama,’ Om restated.

‘Ask him which Ashwatthama he is talking about,’ Abhilash whispered in Shahista’s ear.

‘Ashwatthama, the son of Dronacharya, the immortal cursed by Krishna,’ Om replied without Shahista’s intervention. ‘Krishna’ was all that Shahista could grasp.

Abhilash turned to Dr Batra, ‘He is not making any sense.’ Shahista asked, ‘Who else are you looking for?’ In a broken voice, he said ‘Parashuram.’ Considering it all nonsense, they continued.

‘This name, Vishnu Gupt, seems to be a code name,’ countered Dr Batra, deep in thought.

‘Or he might be mentally disturbed, a patient of split personality, or a little demented,’ he added.

‘This could even be a case of reincarnation,’ Abhilash came back with his mythological point of view.

Dr Batra paid no heed.

‘What other names have you been using lately?’ Shahista continued.

‘Govindlal Yadav, Bhairav Singh, Suvarna Pratap Reddy, Bankim Chandra Chakraborthy, Gursheel Singh Khullar, Vidur, Om Shastri, Hatim Ali Maulvi, Protim Das, Vishnu

Gupt, Kabir, Sushen, Jai Shankar Prasad, Madhukar Rao, Adhiraiyan,' Om began as if reciting a mugged up poem. His accent, tone, pitch, pronunciation and facial expressions changed with every name he mouthed. 'Bhairav Singh', 'Hatim Ali Maulvi', 'Gursheel Singh Khullar' and 'Suvarna Pratap Reddy' were uttered in a tone that spoke of strength and bravery. 'Bankim Chandra Chakraborthy' was spoken in the typical Bengali accent. 'Kabir' and 'Sushen' came with a wave of calmness and serenity. The names seemed unending and continued, with his pitch and tone changing with every uttered name.

Everyone in the room was awestruck at his flawless and natural response. Even the best of actors couldn't have pulled this off so brilliantly.

Shahista held her head in her hands, signifying strain. Dr Srinivasan was taken aback for the first time. LSD had jotted down all the names Om mentioned. Parimal was going through Shahista's notes. Something struck the PhDin-history guy and he at once went to Dr Batra while Om continued reciting names in a semi-conscious state.

'S . . . S . . . Sir, when Om used the names Vish . . . nu Gupt, I believe he was talking about some time in 300 bce b . . . b . . . because Vishnu Gupt was the real name of Chanakya! A . . . and he was the chief a . . . adviser to Chandra Gupt Maurya. You a . . . are welcome to perceive me as a ma . . . dma . . . n but . . .' Parimal said in his usual unsure tone when he was interrupted midway.

'No, Parimal. I wouldn't consider you a madman. In fact, if he was actually talking about Chanakya, then he was talking about the same Banda Bahadur that I thought, but did not believe he was. I need to confirm something about Banda Bahadur as well. Give me a moment,' said Dr Batra and excused himself to make a call.

LSD came over to Parimal, excited.

‘I overheard your conversation. 300 bc! That is 2,317 years back, right?’ LSD said, calculating in the air. ‘Could he possibly be a time traveller?’ LSD’s eyes were almost popping out of their sockets in her enthusiastic anticipation.

This insane idea left Parimal irritated and compelled him to reply coldly, ‘He is nothing but a fra . . . ud. That’s what he is.’

‘*Biji*, *Sat Shri Akaal* (regards, mother)!’

Dr Batra was talking on the phone in a louder volume than his usual as his mother, at the age of eighty, had trouble hearing.

Dr Batra’s voice was loud enough to be heard by all. And since the lab had grown quieter, everyone was easily and intently listening to the conversation. Even LSD stopped her work, which put an end to the sound of typing. ‘*Jinda reh puttar* (Long live my son),’ came an old voice from the other end. ‘*Ik gal dasso mainu* . . . Banda Bahadur *kaun si* (Tell me something . . . who was Banda Bahadur)?’ asked Dr Batra in his regional Punjabi accent.

‘*O puttar*, Banda Singh Bahadur Shri Guru Gobind Singh *ji da jarnel si* (Son, Banda Singh Bahadur was the name of a general of our Guru Gobind Singh),’ replied the feminine voice with a lot of respect and veneration, along with a not-so-juvenile voice that was in sync.

Dr Batra heard the other voice; he turned around to see the source, and instantly knew who had said that. He was shocked to see Om replying to all the questions that he was asking his mother in Punjabi, and Om was considering them as if they were being raised to him, even in a highly drugged and unconscious state, which was abnormal.

Dr Batra tottered as he struggled to interpret what was happening. He was feeling sick. He had been going through

a lot already and needed to resolve this mystery soon.

‘*Onna da intekaal kis tarah hoya si*? (How did he die)?’ Dr Batra asked slowly, asking his mother on the phone but observing Om instead, in surprise.

‘*Onna nu* Mughal *badshah* Farukh Siyar *ne marwaya si* (He was assassinated on the orders of Mughal emperor Farukh Siyar),’ came the voice on the phone and from Om.

This left Dr Batra perplexed and he decided to continue his conversation from a distance where he couldn’t be heard. He departed the room, leaving everyone shocked.

They could see Om Shastri was talking of ancient times and was answering the questions in the language they were asked in: Punjabi. But no one knew why.

Breaking the silence, Veerbhadra entered the laboratory. He was short of breath, which conveyed that he had been running.

He eyed Om Shastri once and then kept walking inside, taking long strides.

‘*Aimi aindi* (What happened)?’ asked Dr Srinivasan in his native tongue. He did not feel right involving everyone, seeing Veerbhadra’s body language.

‘*Varsam padtondi* (It’s raining)!’ replied the fretful Veerbhadra.

‘*Aayite* (So what)?’

Dr Srinivasan was already troubled enough handling Om Shastri. He didn’t want a new drama altogether. ‘*Ataniki gantala kritam yela telusindi* (How come he knew it hours before)?’ asked Veerbhadra, pointing at Om.

Om started to say something in the same dialect.

‘*Mellaga ushnograta mundu* two degrees *taggindi, tarvata inka* five *degreel varuku taggumukham pattindi. Gaali lo tema anapinchindi Tadi matti suvasana, vacchindi gaali 40 km vegam tho veestondi varsham vastundi ani*

anukunnanu (The temperature dropped by two degrees, then another five degrees later. The winds started blowing at about 40 km/h. I could feel moisture in the breeze and could smell the wet soil. So I presumed that rains would follow),' replied Om Shastri with certainty.

'What are you guys talking about?' Dr Batra intervened as he entered the room.

Everyone else was impatiently waiting for the answer.

Veerbhadra started to explain to Dr Batra and the team but Dr Srinivasan interrupted and said, 'Nothing.'

No one reacted or countered. Shahista was confused again as to what to ask Om Shastri. And so she was looking in the direction of her boss for the next command. The hour was on the verge of completion and as Dr Batra had anticipated, Om showed signs of waking up again. The session was done. It was late afternoon.

Nothing went as planned and their old questions subsisted as new ones surfaced. Most of the answers to these questions were in the grip of people who were deliberately hiding them.

'We need to talk,' Dr Batra approached Shahista.

'All of us need to talk,' said an exhausted Shahista.

Om Shastri stirred and awoke. A crestfallen expression came over his face as it dawned upon him that he had let out some more of his 'secrets'.

Dr Srinivasan left the interrogation room and announced a short recess while leaving.

Dr Batra ushered Shahista to the door and mouthed, 'Meet me at the end of the lobby.'

'I suggest we all meet together,' Shahista responded with the same apprehension.

LSD joined them instantly. 'Sir, I have found something.' 'Not here. Come with us,' Dr Batra escorted her. 'I'll bring

the rest,' Shahista called out.

Everyone left the room and Veerbhadra came in to take care of Om Shastri along with his guards.

At the end of the lobby, Parimal was the first to initiate the conversation. 'He i . . . s not referring to divergent centuries. He is ta . . . lking of different millennia. How is that pos . . . sible?' he wondered.

Shahista intervened, 'I don't understand this man. He says his name is Om Shastri. At the same time, he claims to be the Sushen of Ramayana and the Vidur of Mahabharata, which means he wants us to believe that he has stopped ageing. And on top of that, he's also searching for Subhash Chandra Bose, believing him to be Ashwatthama. Who the hell is he exactly?'

'The question is, *what* the hell is he?' Dr Batra was irked. 'LSD, what did you get?' he demanded.

'Sir, many startling facts. To start with, I have found some bank accounts of Om Shastri. They all have a decent balance and are all in different states.'

Abhilash was curious to know why, if he had so much money, would he be teaching in a school, living a mediocre life. 'Hmm . . . and?' Dr Batra listened raptly.

'All his accounts have his photograph on them as proof of identity. I then used his photograph as a key to dig out other information under the various names he pronounced. I discovered that Protim Das has a valid all-India driving licence. Govindlal Yadav has a voter identity card to his name. Bankim Chandra Chakraborthy possesses a passport; Madhukar Rao owns many bonds and shares of DSP dated about seventy years ago. This is the same day when DSP was incorporated and its initial public offering was issued. These shares were purchased by Madhukar Rao's father, Mr Venkata Ramanna Rao. The accounts of Mr Venkata

Ramanna Rao have the same face as Om Shastri's. Om Shastri is forty years old and Madhukar Rao's father also died at the age of forty, as per the records. I went through the data of the fathers of all the mentioned names. Different names, same face. Which means he has been the father and the son both for a period of forty to fifty years each time.

'Now, coming to the lockers. Gursheel Singh Khullar has a locker in Punjab National Bank in Punjab; S.P. Reddy owns a locker in Andhra Bank in Hyderabad. All police records are clean except for Gursheel Singh's father. He has the same face as Gursheel. He was caught at the Indo-Pak border. He is one of the people who were imprisoned in Pakistan. All of these people have graduated from prestigious institutes and universities. Adhiraiyan is a doctor. B.C. Chakraborthy has travelled to Paris. I didn't come across anything about Vishnu Gupt, though. Neither is Chandra Gupt associated with any of the names he mentioned. The same is the case with Vidur and Sanjay,' LSD was proud of her skills in her field.

Before LSD could continue, Dr Batra speculated. 'What about his mother?'

'Their mothers all died when they were very young. No photographs could be found. All of these people have been raised by single fathers,' LSD informed.

'Which can't be a coincidence,' said Dr Shahista, 'He had said that all his identities were real.'

'Did you possibly spot any connection between all these people and Subhash Chandra Bose?' asked Dr Batra, facing LSD.

'Sort of . . . as I found some astonishing facts claimed by people who allege to possess information regarding Subhash Chandra Bose,' LSD revealed.

‘That he didn’t die in a plane crash? Everyone kn . . . ows that,’ Parimal stammered as his eyes filled with anxiety.

‘Yes. But apart from that, I unearthed something very weird. Subhash Chandra Bose died five times, under five different names, in five different cities in India.’ LSD spoke as if revealing a skeleton in the cupboard. ‘What?’ everyone screamed all together.

‘Huh, that was imminent. This man inside attracts everything unworldly to himself,’ Dr Batra criticized.

LSD smiled at the joke, then continued.

‘Subhash Chandra Bose, born on 23 January 1897, was an Indian nationalist whose disobedient patriotism made him a hero in India, but whose attempt during World War II to liberate India of British rule with the help of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan left a troubled inheritance. Known by the honorific ‘Netaji’ (Hindustani: “respected leader”), he was earlier a leader of the younger, fundamentalist wing of the Indian National Congress in the late 1920s and 1930s, rising to become Congress president in 1938 and 1939. However, he was expelled from Congress leadership positions in 1939 following differences with Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress high command. He was subsequently placed under house arrest by the British before escaping from India in 1940.

‘Subhash Chandra Bose was believed to have died in August 1945 at Taihoku, Formosa (now Taipei, Taiwan), in a plane crash. In the unanimity of intellectual opinion, Subhash Chandra Bose’s death occurred from third-degree burns. However, many among his supporters, especially in Bengal, refused at the time, and have refused since, to believe either the fact or the circumstances of his death. Conspiracy theories appeared within hours of his death and have thereafter had a long shelf life, keeping alive various

fierce myths about Bose. These myths of Bose being yet alive gained strength soon after, when, in 1945, he was seen in Delhi and was believed to have been murdered at Red Fort. But, fifteen years later, in 1960, he was sighted in a photograph that was captured in Paris.

‘Bankim Chandra Chakraborthy happened to be in Paris in 1964 in search of Subhash Chandra Bose. On 27 May 1964, Subhash Chandra Bose was seen at the funeral of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India. He was a saint when he was claimed dead again in 1977. After all this humbug and mystification surfaced a theory about Gumnami Baba (a saint who is anonymous). He addressed his people from behind the curtains. In Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh, Gumnami Baba’s confidants somehow revealed his having travelled to Germany in 1944: the same time Subhash Chandra Bose is said to have met Adolf Hitler in Germany.

‘His confidants let out that he praised the beauty of Paris every now and then. There is record of Gumnami Baba’s visit to Paris, but Subhash Chandra Bose had definitely put his foot there. Gumnami Baba’s close friends say that whenever there were local rumours of him being Subhash Chandra Bose, he would change his residence.

‘He is believed to have left his body on 16 September 1985. Another point of interest lies not in this date but in his date of birth, which happens to be 23 January 1897, the same day that Subhash Chandra Bose was born. Needless to say, our subject is of the opinion that Subhash Chandra Bose is still alive and furthermore, that he is searching for him,’ LSD laid out all the facts and information she had laid her hands on.

Everyone was quiet for a moment, comprehending, putting together all the pieces, decoding again. But nothing

made sense. After a while, Dr Batra spoke up, ‘Parimal, what did that sloka mean?’

Parimal answered humbly but stammeringly.

‘Old age frightens man like a tiger. Diseases strike the body like enemies. Life drips down as water from a broken pot. Yet people think of harming others. They do not realize that they are transitory. This is indeed a matter of wonder. That is the exact meaning of the verse,’ Parimal said.

‘None of us is aware of the direction we are heading in through this interrogation, but there is one person who has all the answers and it’s about time we knew the purpose we all are serving here. I am going to Dr Srinivasan. I’ll come back with the answers, or I’ll leave right now. Is anyone joining me?’ asked Dr Batra.

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Chapter 5
Open Ends

Back in the lab, Veerbhadra and Om Shastri were forced into each other's company yet again. Veerbhadra had questions that bothered him, but he couldn't talk to Om. A tiny mistake could put him on the verge of dismissal, he thought. So he deliberately controlled himself despite his curiosity.

Om had been observing Veerbhadra since he had entered. 'You alright?' Om asked, concerned. 'Yes! Why?' Veerbhadra replied, controlling his curiosity. 'You look stressed,' Om said.

Veerbhadra was in a dilemma about whether or not to reveal the thing that was bothering him. He remained silent for a few seconds, contemplating, but the urge to know was far more intense than everything else.

And so he asked, 'You are seated in a chamber. How could you possibly have known that it would rain, and that too, hours before the weather built up? Moreover, you calculated the wind speed, smelt the wet soil, felt the altering temperature. There was no wind in the room. How can your senses be that strong? How did you do that?' Veerbhadra looked around in disbelief.

Om Shastri smiled a bit.

‘As a matter of fact, I am also aware that I am sitting in an island off the southern coast of India. And I just make all this out with the help of my senses,’ Om said as if skills like these were an insignificant part of him.

Veerbhadra was shocked.

‘You can’t know that! You were unconscious and blindfolded in the chopper when you were brought here!’

‘Well, but I do know all of it. It just needs experience and practice. Even you can do that. Anyone can,’ Om shrugged in a matter-of-fact way.

‘How?’ Veerbhadra was unable to take in any of this.

‘As you can easily differentiate between numerous colours with your eyes, just focus and smell the air in layers. Likewise, you can see an aeroplane vanishing in the sky after it takes off and an eagle transforms into a dot as it moves higher. The same way, you can smell things coming close, and going farther away,’ Om explained, betraying all the logic and the reasoning Veerbhadra had ever learnt.

Veerbhadra had much to resolve, and so, not waiting for his brain to comprehend what he had just been told, he put forth another question. ‘You are not south Indian. How do you speak such fluent and flawless Telugu?’

‘When did I speak in Telugu?’ Om was mystified.

Both of them now stared at each other, perplexed. And before anyone could reply, Dr Srinivasan entered the room. Coincidentally, Dr Batra also followed. Veerbhadra looked first at Dr Srinivasan and then towards Dr Batra.

Dr Batra arrogantly stared in the direction of Om Shastri, and then murmured to Dr Srinivasan, ‘Sir, we want to talk to you.’

‘We?’ asked Dr Srinivasan.

‘All of us, sir.’

‘Not now. We’ll talk after this session, at the lunch break.’

‘We will not begin another session before talking to you, sir,’ Dr Batra emphasized.

‘Where is the rest of the team?’ Dr Srinivasan snapped hysterically. ‘In your office, waiting for both of us,’ said Dr Batra.

Om and Veerbhadra were looking at both of them and listening to their conversation. Dr Srinivasan banged a file on the table, exasperated, and proceeded towards Dr Batra. Dr Batra turned the other way and left the room. Dr Srinivasan turned around on his way out and signalled to Veerbhadra to follow him. Veerbhadra followed unwillingly. The guards were left behind to keep an eye on Om Shastri.

‘The temperature of the oil is rising! The chopped onions will burn if there is even a slight delay,’ Om called out from behind Veerbhadra, a smile stretched across his face.

Veerbhadra left the room behind Dr Srinivasan. On his way, just before entering Dr Srinivasan’s cabin, he reached out to peep inside the kitchen, just to make sure. He was astonished to see the flame with a bulk fryer over it and the chef out of sight. Chopped onions were kept beside the stove for frying in the bulk fry. The oil had reached the appropriate temperature. Veerbhadra reached out and overturned the vessel of onion in the pan. The chef suddenly appeared and was stunned to see Veerbhadra there.

Veerbhadra left the kitchen hastily to catch up with Dr Srinivasan.

Dr Srinivasan entered his office and found everyone standing there. He crossed everyone, reached his chair behind the table and sat down in his habitual fashion, with an attitude of superiority. He kept his gaze on Dr Batra. The tension in the room was tangible, which further heated the environment.

‘Who is he?’ Dr Batra began with the obvious question.

‘Tej, you are here to do what you have been called for. You haven’t been called to question me.’

‘I have the right to know. Who is the man we are dealing with?’ Dr Batra pushed his limits further as he was being backed by the team.

Dr Srinivasan was offended and stood up immediately, saying, ‘No! You do not have any rights here. All your rights are reserved with me.’

‘Please calm down, sir,’ Shahista interjected at Dr Srinivasan’s outburst, and continued. ‘There are some strange conclusions we are being compelled to draw on the basis of our incomplete knowledge of him. And we all are alarmed and confused.’

Shahista’s words calmed Dr Srinivasan to an extent, and he replied, ‘None of you need to be afraid. You are all safe here.’

Veerbhadra, who was standing right behind Dr Srinivasan, nodded in agreement.

‘We may be safe here. But our families might not be, if he is a terrorist.’ Dr Batra showed his concern.

‘He is not a terrorist, damn it!’ Dr Srinivasan got worked up again and thundered in his throaty voice. His verdict seemed to be echoing in the distance.

‘How can you be so sure?’ Dr Batra wasn’t giving in to someone’s whims and tantrums. Not this time.

‘Because I know,’ Dr Srinivasan was clearly controlling himself, folding his arms over his chest.

‘What more do you know?’ Dr Batra demanded, doing the same thing in return.

Dr Srinivasan remained tight-lipped. Shahista came close to Dr Srinivasan, soothed him by patting his shoulder, and made him sit down. She offered him a glass of water that was kept on the table. He took it.

Shahista allowed the man to relax before saying very calmly, ‘Sir, we have come across some facts which are bothering us and leading to such open-ended conclusions. LSD, please brief sir.’

LSD repeated the gist of her knowledge about Om Shastri by saying, ‘Sir, this man we recognize as Om Shastri has many identities in various parts of the country. In some places he is mentioned as his own father and in others as his own son, carrying the same face but different names. I came across two active lockers in the names of his other identities and numerous bank accounts with huge sums in them. Legally, he came out clean. He seems a highly organized person and might be working for some underground terrorist organization. He may be on a confidential mission which we have not discovered yet. The other fact we turned up is that he is searching for Subhash Chandra Bose, which may be of utmost concern to the government authorities and to the nation in general.’

Dr Srinivasan listened intently as LSD presented the facts.

Dr Shahista, taking it from there, said, ‘While in a state of hypnotism, he talked of people who had walked the earth in past millennia. Some of us suppose that he remembers all his reincarnations. Some think he might be a patient of split personality disorder. He could even be a member of some ancient, secret group working generation after generation on some hidden purpose. But none of his identities stands in coherence with any of these possibilities.’

As Dr Shahista finished, a silence swept the workplace. Shahista went on.

‘Sir, please help us with what you know if you want us to help you.’

‘What is the reality of this facility? Why did we get this man? What are we struggling to get out of him? Tell us all you know, please, sir.’ Dr Batra sounded more helpless than enraged this time.

Dr Srinivasan didn’t let any expression crowd his face, as usual. He took in a deep breath and stared at his feet, as if calculating something in his head.

After a while, he spoke.

‘Okay. I’ll tell you all whatever I know. But before I do that, I want you to fetch me the details of the lockers Om mentioned.’

LSD said, ‘Already done, sir, here they are.’

She promptly handed over the page to Dr Srinivasan, who passed it on to Veerbhadra.

Veerbhadra left the room with the paper instantly. He knew what to do with it.

Dr Srinivasan carefully unlocked a vault in his desk and took out a few photographs and some documents. He handed all of this to Dr Shahista, who in turn circulated them among the others, after having a look at them one by one. All the photographs captured Om Shastri in different appearances and outfits. Each snapshot contained the year and the place where it was taken. Shahista read them one by one: 1874 in Banaras, 1882 in Haryana, 1888 in Madras, 1895 in Maharashtra, 1902 in Kerala, 1916 in Lucknow, 1930 at the Salt Satyagraha (a request for truth, the movement led by Mahatma Gandhi for complete independence), 1944 in the Forward Bloc of Subhash Chandra Bose’s army, 1947 in Delhi in the crowd at the flag hoisting, 1964 at Jawaharlal Nehru’s funeral, 1984 at Indira Gandhi’s funeral, 1991 at Rajiv Gandhi’s funeral, 1998, 2001, 2005, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015 . . .

Dr Srinivasan carefully studied their faces and said, ‘These are the death certificates and other government records proving the deaths of all those names carried by Om, but once he is dead somewhere, he appears alive somewhere else. Remarkably, he has the same age in each photograph, neither younger nor older. Approximately forty years.’ Dr Srinivasan paused so they could all grasp the information and when he spoke again, his voice was intense.

‘That is why all of you are here. You aren’t here to question me as to who the man is. Instead, I am here to get answers from you about this man. You all are a part of this secret mission to get answers and relevant information from this mysterious man. Remember, *secret* mission!’

Dr Batra’s mind was flooded with doubts and he didn’t hesitate to put them forward.

‘Who owns this organization?’ he asked bluntly.

‘Enough questions, Tej! This is all you needed to know. Now you are left with only two choices. Get back to work or pack your belongings, and I shall make arrangements for your return,’ Dr Srinivasan warned, unable to hide the scorn in his voice.

Dr Batra went very still. He was about to turn on his heel to get back to the laboratory when Shahista spoke up.

‘Sir, it will take weeks to gather all the information from Om Shastri, as he regains his wits every other hour of hypnotizing.’

‘Can you suggest some other way, doctor?’ Dr Srinivasan asked as if he knew the answer.

‘Yes, sir. I suggest we try talking to him directly, without any use of sedatives or hypnotism,’ Shahista proposed.

‘I’m afraid he won’t say anything that way,’ Dr Srinivasan showed some concern.

‘He will, sir. He has no idea how much he has already disclosed. We can make him believe that we know everything and then he will tell us everything.’

‘This could prove to be a risky procedure for all of you,’ Dr Srinivasan warned.

Dr Shahista had begun to learn how to convince and handle Dr Srinivasan. Her understanding approach had the strength to win over his dominant personality.

So she said, ‘Sir, I have interrogated numerous criminals and with my experience, I can confidently assure you that he is not to be feared.’

‘I don’t think we should trust him without the drugs and hypnotism. There will always be the possibility of the truth being doctored while it travels through his nerves to his mouth.’ Dr Srinivasan maintained his stand on the issue.

‘We could make use of a lie detector and LSD here could help us in visualizing everything that he thinks while he speaks,’ Dr Batra spoke as if suggesting some million-dollar plan.

‘Sir, a few devices will be connected to his body through cables. They’ll register his pulse rate and the wavelength of his thoughts, and convert them to visuals on the screen. If he responds well, we can see the exact replica of what he remembers, along with the minutest details, like the era and the time. Am I right, LSD?’ Shahista said.

‘That will be great fun!’ LSD chimed in excitement. Her words came out a bit fumbled as she had her mouth occupied with a chewing gum, which she wasn’t embarrassed about. But right after she said that, everyone else threw a glance at her that said ‘What’s wrong with you?’ In response to this gesture, she stopped chewing her gum and started working silently.

‘Sir, words may lie, but thoughts can’t be voluntarily controlled. If we see the visuals of his thoughts, there’s no way he can fool us,’ Shahista said.

Dr Srinivasan went back and forth in his mind, weighing everything against the possible consequences, while everyone else waited for an indication.

Shahista pleaded, ‘Sir, it’s your turn to believe in us and in your own selection of the best experts.’

Dr Srinivasan was forced to agree. But before he did that, he asked, ‘What if this doesn’t work?’

‘Then we will carry on the same way we have been doing until now,’ Dr Batra assured him.

‘Sir, it has been very difficult so far. Every sentence he spoke stimulated numerous questions. I am now clueless about what to ask him,’ Shahista said.

‘Okay, go ahead with whatever you feel like. But be cautious, Shahista. You must maintain the necessary distance. No recordings. We’ll start after lunch.’ Dr Srinivasan was concerned.

Everyone proceeded towards the dining room for lunch but Dr Shahista headed towards the laboratory.

She walked towards Om and stood in front of him. She brought back the jovial smile on her lips and said, ‘Hello. I am Shahista. I didn’t get a chance to introduce myself properly before. Om, please have your lunch while I join the others. If you need anything, do let me know.’ Shahista tried to befriend Om, as her job after lunch was to talk to him in his conscious state. Psychology says that once you gain the trust of a person, you get his secrets too.

‘I requested them to untie me, I wanted to use the restroom,’ said Om humbly. ‘Oh! Sure, Om. Actually, they aren’t authorized to talk to you or make any decision on

their own. Please pardon the inconvenience,' Shahista said with amiability on her face.

She then ordered one of the guards to escort Om Shastri to the restroom.

Shahista was now confident about the next session as Om wasn't defensive or rude to her.

As the guard did the needful, Om turned and said, 'One more thing. I'm a vegetarian. I don't like cabbage. Potatoes and pulses will work. Green chilli and salt separately, please,' Om laid out his eating style.

Shahista didn't understand him, but nodded nevertheless. She then left the laboratory and as she reached the dining room and saw the menu, she freaked out. She saw non-vegetarian food being served along with two vegetables: potato and cabbage. She got a hold of herself and said, 'Do not send non-vegetarian for Om, nor cabbage. He doesn't eat that.'

'How do you know?' LSD was baffled.

'He told me himself,' Shahista replied.

'What?' LSD inquired.

'That he is a vegetarian and he dislikes cabbage. And that he wants green chillies and salt separately.'

Everyone looked at each other in shock while Shahista started having her food.

LSD racked her brains and spoke slowly, 'How could he make out that potatoes and cabbage were on the menu for lunch? Moreover, if he stated that he was a vegetarian, how did he even know that non-vegetarian food has been cooked?'

Shahista stopped midway at that and began to ponder.

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Chapter 6
Divine Yugas

There was a momentary silence after which Parimal spoke, ‘Looking at all the photogra . . . phs, the theories of his split persona . . . lity and of reincarna . . . tion are out. What’s the new expla . . . nation?’

Another few moments passed in silence, which were shattered by LSD, saying, ‘Time travel!’

She was looking at her laptop when she said that, concentrating on her gadgets.

‘Bah! Humbug! Time travel is a myth. Time is not stagnant; you can’t travel back and forth over it. The past is the past and the future hasn’t materialized yet,’ Abhilash criticized LSD’s theory.

LSD chose to ignore his words. Dr Batra then said to everyone, ‘Parimal says that Vishnu Gupt, which Om claims he himself is, was the other name of Chanakya. Also that Chandra Gupt is probably Chandra Gupt Maurya of the Maurya Dynasty.

‘I am compelled to trust him because the Banda Singh Bahadur and Farukh Siyar he mentioned are names from Sikh mythology. You all might have overheard my conversation on the phone a few minutes ago. Now I want to know your views about all this.’

‘Dr Batra, you are a doctor. How could you believe all this? This is downright illogical,’ Shahista was furious.

‘Okay, Dr Shahista. Then please proceed and logically explain all these people and their fathers carrying the same face in the documents LSD discovered,’ Dr Batra retorted.

Dr Shahista was speechless and remained so.

‘Sir, Om Shastri’s recitation is an original by Chanakya,’ LSD was still on her mission.

‘Who is Banda Bahadur? And what’s the past of Chanakya?’ Abhilash questioned. Before Dr Batra could say anything about Banda Bahadur, Parimal responded in his stammering voice, but this time, he was a little more confident while speaking.

‘Cha . . . nakya’s birth is believed to have happened in 350 bce but it . . . is a matter of controversy a . . . nd there are multiple the . . . ories about his origin. According to the Buddhist tex . . . t, his birthplace was Takshashila. The Jain scri . . . ptures mention him as a “Dramila”, implying that he was a native of south India. According to another Jain belief, Cha . . . nakya was born in the Cha . . . naka village of the Golla region, to a Brahmin named Cha . . . nin and his wife Chaneshvari. Other sources mention his father’s name as Cha . . . nak and state that Cha . . . nakya’s name is derived from his father’s name. According to some sources, Cha . . . nakya was a Brahmin from north India, a scholar of the Vedas and a devotee of Vishnu. According to Jain accounts, he became a Jain in his old age like Cha . . . ndra Gupt Maurya,’ recited Parimal.

‘Cha . . . nakya was an Indian teacher, philosopher, economist, jurist and royal advisor. He is traditionally identified as Kautilya or Vishnu Gupt, who authored the ancient Indian political treatise, the Art . . . hashastra. As such, he is considered a pioneer in the field of political

science and economics in India and his work is thought of as an important precursor to class . . . ical economics. His works were lost near the end of the Gupta empire and not rediscovered till 1915.' Everyone listened to Parimal's narration about Chanakya attentively.

LSD took over from there with her laptop, reading aloud more information on him.

'Originally a teacher at the ancient university of Takshashila, Chanakya assisted the first Mauryan emperor Chandra Gupt in his rise to power. He is widely credited with having played an important role in the establishment of the Maurya empire. Chanakya served as the chief advisor to both emperors, Chandra Gupt and his son Bindusara.

Parimal added some more information, 'According to one legend, Cha . . . nakya withdrew to the jungle and starved himself to dea . . . th. According to another legend mentioned by Hemachandra, Cha . . . nakya died as a result of a cons . . . piracy by Subandhu, one of Bindusara's ministers. Subandhu, who did not like Cha . . . nakya, told Bindusara that Cha . . . nakya was responsible for the murder of his mother. Bindusara asked the nurses, who confirmed the story of his mother's death. Bindusara was horr . . . ified and enraged. When Cha . . . nakya learnt that the king was angry with him, he decided to end his life. In acc . . . ordance with Jain tradition, he decided to sta . . . rve himself to death. By this time, the king had learnt the full story, which was that Cha . . . nakya was not respo . . . nsible for his mother's death, which was an accident. He asked Subandhu to convince Cha . . . nakya to give up his plan to kill himself. However, Subandhu instead conducted a cere . . . mony for Cha . . . nakya, only to burn him alive. There are no definite mentions of Cha . . . nakya's death—'

Abhilash interrupted, ‘Which means Chanakya’s death is still unclear?’

‘Chanakya is regarded as a great scholar and a visionary in India. Many Indian nationalists regard him as one of the earliest people to imagine a united India spanning the entire subcontinent. India’s former National Security Advisor, Shiv Shankar Menon, praised Chanakya’s Arthashastra for its clear and precise rules, which apply even today,’ LSD continued again.

‘Banda Bahadur?’ asked Abhilash again.

Everyone looked to Dr Batra for some light on this Sikh name. Dr Batra stated, ‘Banda Singh Bahadur was born Lachman Dev in 1670 and later became a Sikh military commander.

‘At the age of fifteen, he left home to become an ascetic and was given the name “Madho Das”. He established a monastery at Nanded, on the banks of the river Godavari.

That was where, in 1708 he was visited by, and became a disciple of, Guru Gobind Singh, who gave him the new name of Banda Singh Bahadur. Equipped with the blessings and authority of Guru Gobind Singh, he assembled a fighting force and led the struggle against the Mughal emperor. After establishing his authority in Punjab, Banda Singh Bahadur abolished the zamindari system and granted property rights to the tillers of the land. In 1715, Banda Singh Bahadur was captured from the Gurdas Nangal fort and put in an iron cage. The remaining Sikhs from his troop were captured and chained. The Sikhs were brought to Delhi in a procession with 780 Sikh prisoners, 2,000 Sikh heads hung on spears and 700 cartloads of slaughtered Sikh heads to terrorize the population. They were put in the Delhi fort and pressurized to give up their faith and become Muslims. On their firm refusal, all of them were ordered to be executed. Every day,

100 Sikhs were brought out of the fort and murdered in public, which went on for around seven days. The Mughals could hardly contain their joy while the Sikhs showed no sign of dejection or humiliation. Instead, they sang their sacred hymns; none feared death or gave up their faith. The Sikh Sardars were subjected to tortures in front of Banda Bahadur before being executed. Their heads were then impaled on spears and arranged in a circle around Banda, who was now squatting on the ground. He was then given a short sword and ordered to kill his own son, Ajai Singh. As he sat unperturbed, the executioner moved forward and plunged his sword into the little child, cutting his body into two.

Then pieces of flesh were cut from the body and thrown at Banda's face. His liver was removed and thrust into Banda Singh's mouth. The father sat through all this without any signs of emotion. His powers of endurance were to be tested still further. The executioner then stepped forward and thrust the point of his dagger into Banda's right eye, pulling out the eyeball. He then pulled out the other eyeball. Banda sat through all this as still as a rock. His face gave no twitch of pain. The cruel devil then took his sword and slashed off Banda's left foot, then both his arms. But Banda's features were still calm as if he was at peace with his creator. Finally, they tore off his flesh with red-hot pincers, and there being nothing else left in their book of tortures, they cut his body up into a hundred pieces, and were satisfied.'

LSD was glued to her laptop again and was clicking and scrolling continuously.

'Sir, there is huge time gap between the lifetimes of Chanakya and Banda Bahadur. Chanakya belonged to the era of 350 bc, whereas Banda Singh Bahadur belonged to a

more recent period of history, 1675.’ LSD spoke with her eyes fixed on her screen.

‘But Om Shastri said he worked as an advisor to both. Maintained a difference of 2,000 years, almost! What rubbish!’ Shahista exclaimed.

‘I would say he is talking about the various yugas. He also mentioned the name Sanjay, the son of Gavalgan, and Vidur, the minister of Hastinapur,’ Abhilash joined in, portraying his usual proud self.

‘Yugas? Abhilash, explain,’ LSD countered sarcastically.

‘My dear, that is impossible for you to grasp,’ Abhilash snapped back with an even more sarcastic smile.

‘Still, you ought to explain to us,’ Dr Shahista interjected.

Dr Shahista and LSD waited for Abhilash to begin and had their gaze on him.

‘Hindu mythology bifurcates time into four yugas. These are Satya yuga, Treta yuga, Dwapara yuga, and Kali yuga.’

Shahista nodded, slowly comprehending.

‘If at all there is a theory, how many years roughly does each of these yugas consist of?’

Abhilash picked up a pen and paper and started writing while answering Shahista’s question.

‘According to Srimad Bhagavatam, one of the earliest known texts describing the yugas, the duration of the Satya yuga equals 4,800 years of the demigods; Treta yuga equals 3,600 years, Dwapara yuga equals 2,400 years; and the Kali yuga is 1,200 years of the demigods. One year of the demigods is equal to 360 years of the human beings. These four yugas follow a timeline ratio of 4:3:2:1. The duration of the yugas is therefore:

4,000 + 400 + 400 = 4,800 divine years (= 17,28,000 human years) = 1 Satya yuga

3,000 + 300 + 300 = 3,600 divine years (= 12,96,000 human years) = 1 Treta yuga

2,000 + 200 + 200 = 2,400 divine years (= 8,64,000 human years) = 1 Dwapara yuga

1,000 + 100 + 100 = 1,200 divine years (= 4,32,000 human years) = 1 Kali yuga

‘The end of the Kali Yuga is 4,27,000 years from now, which also means that the age of the Kali Yuga so far is only 5,000 years.

‘God Vishnu incarnates on Earth from time to time to eradicate evil forces, to restore dharma and to liberate the worthy ones or devotees from the cycle of births and deaths. The above timeline ratio of 4:3:2:1 also indicates the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu, also known as Dashavatar. The first four avatars of Vishnu appeared in Satya yuga, followed by three avatars in Treta, two in Dwapara and the tenth avatar will appear in the Kali yuga. The Kali yuga is described as ending with the appearance of the Kalki avatar, who will defeat the wicked, liberate the virtuous, and initiate a new Satya yuga. According to these beliefs, in the Satya yuga, the process of self-realization was meditating upon Vishnu. During this yuga, the majority of the population were epitomes of goodness. In the Treta yuga, man extended his knowledge and power over the attributes of Universal Magnetism, the source of positive, negative, and neutralizing electricity and the two poles of creative attraction and repulsion. People in this age remained righteous and adhered to moral ways of life, though godly qualities decreased by a fourth in comparison to the Satya yuga. Lord Rama lived in this age. In the

Dwapara yuga, the process of self-realization was the worship of deities in temples. Godly qualities reduced to 50 per cent by this age. We live in the Kali yuga, a world infested with impurities and vices. Virtuous people are diminishing day by day. Floods and famine, war and crime, deceit and duplicity characterize this age. But the scriptures say that final emancipation can be acquired only in this age. It is predicted that at the end of Kali yuga, Lord Shiva shall destroy the universe and all the physical bodies will undergo a great transformation. After such a dissolution, Lord Brahma will recreate the world and humans will become the "Beings of Truth" again,' Abhilash explained.

'How can you sum up the difference between these ages in a few words?' Shahista asked.

'In Satya yuga, the fight was between two worlds: Deva loka (pertaining to the world of the gods) and Asura loka (pertaining to the world of demons.) Asura loka, being evil, was a different world.

'In Treta yuga, the fight was between Rama and Ravana. Both evil and gods ruled from two different countries, but in the same world.

'In Dwapara yuga, the fight was between Pandavas and Kauravas. This was the yuga when both good and evil lived and fought within the same "family". With every passing yuga, the evil continued getting closer, entering the same world, then the same country, then the same family.

'Now, where is the evil in Kali yuga? It is inside us. Both good and evil live within us. The battle is within us. Who will emerge victorious? Who will dominate the other, our inner goodness or the evil within?'

Shahista looked at him, staggered.

'Will somebody tell me what the hell is going on here and what exactly are we dealing with? All of you have lost your

minds. These things . . . these are impossible and mythology has no grounds in factual realities,' she thundered.

'Who says this?' asked Abhilash.

'Science! Science says this. Now can we get back to the real work here, if you guys are done with your stories?'

An eerie silence engulfed the room at Shahista's outburst and remained so until Abhilash spoke up again, contradicting Dr Shahista bluntly.

'These are not just stories, but our legacies. This is our past and fortunately or unfortunately it is true. Do you think there's nothing above science? Let me ask you one question. Tell me, when did your science discover the distance between the sun and the earth?' Shahista was dumbstruck as she didn't know the answer. LSD, on the other hand, quickly displayed her investigation skills. A few clicks on Google and she replied with pride, 'The seventeenth century! Giovanni Cassini and Jean Richer pegged the distance from the earth to the sun as 140 million kilometres, just 9 million kilometres off the now official figure.'

Abhilash said, 'In the Hanuman Chalisa, there's a line, "*Yug sahastra yojan par bhanu! Leelyo taahi madhur phal janu*!'

He grabbed the marker and started scribbling on the white board.

'Here, one yug is equal to 12,000 years.

One sahastra = 1000 and 1 yojan = 8 miles.

Now, yug x sahastra x yojan is equal to par bhanu, which means 12,000 x 1,000 x 8 miles, that is, 9,60,00,000 miles. Let me also tell you that 1 mile = 1.6 km. And 9,60,00,000 miles is equal to 9,60,00,000 x 1.63 km, which is 153 million kilometres to the sun, approximately.' His hands converted his words into calculations and displayed them on the board.

Everyone stood still, looking at each other's faces. Dr Batra started to walk back towards his chair while Abhilash was busy scribbling on the white board. After Dr Batra was seated, Abhilash continued, 'That's not the end. The Vedas' detailed descriptions of the universe, planets and other phenomena demonstrate the vast knowledge of the people of those times, far before modern civilization even started to exist. A Vedic scholar, Sayana, discovered the speed of light back in the fourteenth century ad. His quote translates to "With deep respect, I bow to the sun, who travels 2,202 yojans in half a *nimesha*." Now again, let me show you some calculations,' he said pointing to the white board.

'A yojan is approximately 9 miles and a nimesha is 16/75 of a second. So 2,202 yojans x 9 miles x 75/8 nimeshas equals 1,85,794 miles per second, which is, remarkably, equal to the actual value of 1,86,282.397 miles per second.

'In fact, the Rig Veda 5.40.5 has a phrase which translates to "O Sun! When you are blocked by the one whom you gifted your own light (moon), then the earth will be surprised by the sudden darkness."

'This is a remarkably accurate description of a solar eclipse,' he put his marker down on the table and let out a deep sigh, as if someone had taken a weight off his shoulders.

Everyone was listening intently while Abhilash continued to exhibit his knowledge, 'You know those two brothers who invented the aeroplane?' 'Wright brothers!' LSD replied quickly. Abhilash nodded in agreement. He continued, 'The Wright Brothers invented the aeroplane in the nineteenth century. However, the description, mechanism and operation was written centuries before them in our mythology. We called it *vimanas* then, and in fact, the Pushpak Vimana is also mentioned in the Ramayana.

According to Dronaparva, vimanas are described as shaped like spheres and as moving at a great speed on mighty winds generated by mercury. The Vaimaanika Shastra of Maharishi Bharadhwaja gives a description of aircraft that are much more advanced than our present aircraft.'

Everyone in the room was enthralled by the way Abhilash explained things. Shahista, however, was still unimpressed. She blatantly asked, 'For how long do I have to bear with your utter nonsense?' Silence engulfed the room. Parimal looked at her straight in the eye. 'Thi . . . s i . . . sn't nonsense. I don't doubt . . . science but you'll have to agree that our my . . . thology has described a lot of stuf . . . f centurie . . . s before science could . . . even think about them. You're a doctor, right? I'm sure you know about S . . . ushruta Sam . . . hita.' Shahista nodded in agreement. LSD quickly typed something and replied, 'Yes, I know about it too. It's one of the oldest, best and outstanding commentaries on the medical science of surgery. It is the earliest medical encyclopaedia known to the world, written by a man named Sushruta, an ancient Indian surgeon. Sushruta, dubbed the "founding father of surgery", was a physician originally of south India who practised in Varanasi. One of the earliest known mentions of the name is in the Bower Manuscript (fourth or fifth century), where Sushruta is listed as one of the ten sages residing in the Himalayas.

'Texts also suggest that he learned surgery in Varanasi from Dhanvantari, the god of medicine in Hindu mythology.'

Abhilash felt confident as he had a supporter now. He looked at Dr Batra, who was listening to everything attentively. While Shahista still had doubts, LSD seemed to enjoy this debate. Dr Batra got up from his chair and looked at everyone. After a couple of minutes, he said, 'Even though I don't know much about mythology, we can't ignore

the fact that medical practices had started long before modern science or modern medicine came into the picture. It was announced in a scientific journal that the oldest and the first evidence of the drilling of teeth of a living person was found in Mehrgarh. Eleven drilled molar crowns from nine adults were discovered in a graveyard in Mehrgarh that was 7,500– 9,000 years old. Some evidence of orthopaedic surgeries was also found, leading to the conclusion that ancient India had the technology to implement surgical procedures. In fact, anaesthesia was made using herbs in Ayurveda.'

Meanwhile, Dr Srinivasan sat in his office with his phone on. He addressed the person he was conversing with as 'sir'. It seemed as if some orders were being passed on through the phone to Dr Srinivasan. He assured 'sir' of the safety of the laboratory and all other members. He then explained why it was important to pay heed to the suggestions of the other team members.

At last, he said, 'Thank you, sir,' and hung up. The next session then began.

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Chapter 7
Existence Exhibited

Everyone assembled in the same room and took their respective seats. Shahista sat on the seat next to Om. She looked around to make sure the guards were in the vicinity this time, for the sake of everyone's safety. This time, everybody could sense the sensitivity of the situation; they could feel something and were apprehensive.

Dr Srinivasan came close to Om, bent down in front of him and said, 'What should we call you? Om? Or Bankim? Madhukar maybe? Gursheel is good? Or you'd prefer Vidur? Surprised, right? You have spilled a lot of things. Now, either we get the rest of it just the same way, or you can choose to reveal it all willingly. By force or by choice: either way, we will acquire whatever we desire. What do you say?' Dr Srinivasan had a sardonic smile.

Om didn't speak and his face conveyed that he had already given in. He appeared to be very disturbed, like a thief who was just told where his million-dollar treasure could be found.

Dr Srinivasan straightened up, moved farther away and instructed Dr Shahista to explain the new process to Om.

Shahista complied.

‘Om, we are going to hook you up to a lie detector and project your thoughts as visuals on the screen by matching their wavelength and converting them into images,’ Shahista spoke as humbly as she could, like a mother explaining to her child, who’s about to be vaccinated.

‘Which means that . . .’ Om said steadily and was interrupted by Dr Batra.

‘Which means you can’t lie, because your thoughts will be displayed as clearly as you have lived them.’

‘I am sure you don’t have any objection. Do you?’ Dr Srinivasan spoke arrogantly.

‘Do I have a choice?’ Om said.

‘None ! Dr Batra, set up.’ Dr Srinivasan said.

‘Yes, sir,’ Dr Batra replied.

Om glanced towards Shahista, who was already looking at him sympathetically.

Dr Srinivasan left the laboratory for his office and dialled Veerbhadra’s number on his way.

‘Veerbhadra, report!’ he commanded.

At the other end, Veerbhadra said, ‘Sir, our people have those lockers secured. They will reach in some time.’

Dr Srinivasan asked for whatever was in that locker to be brought to him as soon as they arrived.

Veerbhadra responded, ‘Consider it retained, sir,’ while going through the location and address of the locker.

Dr Srinivasan asked, ‘How much time you need?’

Veerbhadra took a moment to calculate the travel time and informed Dr Srinivasan that he would have it on his desk by early morning.

Having said this, Veerbhadra left. Srinivasan continued talking to Dr Batra and rest of the team members.

Outside Dr Srinivasan’s office, Veerbhadra made some calls and arrangements in order to complete his task in the

given time.

Veerbhadra spoke into the phone: ‘How long will it take to reach me?’ After hearing the reply, Veerbhadra said, ‘Do not leave any traces behind. My men will give you a sealed envelope. After securing it, deliver it to the address on the envelope, to the person who gives you this code: 5MW580YLF, written as a serial number on a 100-rupee note.’

Veerbhadra disconnected the call and dialled another number.

‘You will get the parcel tonight at the same address. Secure it. Your code is 5MW580YLF. Get the package delivered safely to the chopper pilot at the earliest. Your payments will be transferred to your accounts and the 100-rupee note will be delivered to you before time.’

Back in the laboratory, LSD and Dr Batra carried out the placement of all the wires and kept talking to each other while doing so.

Abhilash, meanwhile, helped Shahista in preparing a list of questions to ask.

‘You must start from Sushen, one of his own names as he had revealed,’ Abhilash suggested.

‘Why Sushen specifically? Why not any other name?’ Shahista was perplexed.

‘Because that is, in my view, the oldest of all and happens to be one end of this tangled thread. The other end is Om Shastri. Or you could begin by asking all he knows about the Satya yuga.’

‘I am a bit confused. Who was Sushen?’ Shahista said in an apologetic yet demanding tone.

‘Alright! During the period of the Ramayana, which is Treta yuga, the second after Satya yuga, in the war between Lord Ram and Ravana, Lakshman (Lord Ram’s younger

brother) was struck by a deadly arrow shot by Indrajeet (Ravana's son). It is said that only one herb had the ability to save Lakshman's life, the sanjeevani *buti*, at mount Dunagiri in the Himalayas. The vaidya who suggested the sanjeevani buti was Sushen. You must have seen the image of Lord Hanuman flying with a mountain in his left hand. If he is talking of Vidur, it's in the Mahabharata, that is, the Dwapara yuga. And that means, Sushen must be known as Sushen from the legendary Ramayana who, according to the stories, saved the life of Lakshman by suggesting the Sanjeevani herb, for which Lord Hanuman lifted the whole mountain,' Abhilash explained.

'So, you want to say that in order to sort out the connections between all the names, we need to begin from Sushen, that is, the Treta yuga?' Shahista cleared the clouds of doubt from her head.

'I did what you asked me to, and I've stumbled onto something,' LSD said.

'What?' Abhilash was curious.

'Vidur is said to be Dhritarashtra's brother, the most knowledgeable and wise person of his era.'

'And Sanjay?'

'Sanjay was Dhritarashtra's advisor and also worked as his eyes to the world. His father was Gavalgan.'

'So I was right!' Abhilash beamed with pride. And LSD added to his pride by confessing, 'Hmm! Looks like you were!'

'Exactly! You see, it sounds crazy, but I'm serious. There is surely some association between this man and the man from Treta yuga. And it's odd that all our answers lie with only one person, Om Shastri. So, we must start from there.'

After hooking up Om to the lie detector, Dr Batra engrossed himself on his computer. Seeing this, Dr Shahista

joined him, leaving Abhilash. As Dr Srinivasan entered the laboratory, Dr Batra called out to him, ‘Sir, we are ready!’

‘Proceed, then,’ replied Dr Srinivasan, with a cold gaze.

Shahista requested, ‘Om, please cooperate. I assure you that you won’t be harmed.’

Om nodded half-heartedly. Dr Batra and LSD did the needful. They connected Om with various wires and cables.

Within a few minutes, Om found himself tied extensively. Cords ran from his head, chest, arms and feet, and diverged in two opposite directions. The ones that originated from his head were further connected to a computer and another machine, which in turn was secured to a projector screen. All others ran straight to the lie detector. Dr Batra and LSD were done with their part of the preparation.

Shahista had readied her questions with Abhilash’s help. Everyone was set to start; all the lights were switched off. Darkness swept in. The only light came from the computer screens. LSD pressed some keys on her system and finally hit enter. As soon as she did that, a sheet of paper was scratched by some pins, sketching a graph. Some images appeared on the screen for a split second and went off. Om had opened his eyes.

The screen didn’t show any images when Om’s eyes were open. As he blinked, the brightness in the room increased. The screen projected the time of the day, the places, the attire of the people that were being projected, seasons, cultures: everything flew past all of them without making any sense.

The guards in the room were alert and loaded their guns in preparation for any unwanted activity. The faces in the room were also being displayed in a jumbled form as Om’s thoughts kept on skipping rapidly. Shahista realized that

Om’s thoughts needed to be controlled. For that, she had to give Om a feeling of calmness and safety.

To do that, Shahista held Om’s shoulder, and said in a soothing voice, ‘Om, it’s okay. Calm down. You are not alone. Open your eyes and look at me. Take deep breaths, let your body go loose, relax, de-stress yourself.’

As Shahista spoke, the screen changed gradually and things became clearer. The images stood still a while before moving out of the queue.

Dr Srinivasan ordered the guards to be alert.

As his voice registered on Om’s eardrums, Dr Srinivasan could see himself on the screen. Following that, the landscape of a village flowed in. There was greenery everywhere. Dr Srinivasan’s gaze deepened and he grew serious. Thereafter, came the image of a government school, some children sitting on old, worn-out wooden benches and a few Englishmen in the uniform of the East India Company. The image seemed prior to India’s independence. This image was a jolt to Dr Srinivasan, who was shaken to the core.

Everyone except Shahista had clearly noticed that change in expression and the uncomfortable body language.

Shahista said, ‘Om, are you ready to do this?’ And as she said that, the screen turned blank.

‘Hmm!’ came the answer from Om Shastri. The lie detector beeped, which meant Om wasn’t really ready.

All the eyes turned towards the direction of the beep. Om’s too. He then looked at Shahista, who had a slight trace of a smile on her face. Shahista spoke maturely, ‘It’s okay. I understand. But we have to start this now. Om, when you open your eyes, we lose the visuals. So, you have to keep them closed while speaking,’ she explained.

Om silently closed his eyes. Shahista looked towards Dr Srinivasan first and then towards Dr Batra. Both nodded slowly. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes for a moment and started the procedure. ‘Who is Sushen?’ she asked her first question.

Om was silent for a while but he knew his memories would say it all and so he spoke.

‘It was me.’

As he said that, the picture of a village and a forest flashed on the screen. Tribal people could be seen, donned in few but clean clothes, barefoot, carrying bows and arrows. Numerous trees and flowers could be seen. It seemed to be a rich and fertile land, with mountains, amazing species of plants and flowers and dense forests with high falls.

‘What is this place?’ Shahista asked.

‘A village in southern India,’ replied Om.

‘Who were you there?’

‘I was a vaidya there. People approached me for various treatments. I knew of every root, bark, leaf and flower that ever grew on the mountains. I knew of each disease and its cure.’

‘Where exactly is this village?’ prodded Shahista.

‘The name is Suchindram. It now falls under the Kanyakumari district, in Tamil Nadu.’

‘Whose lives did you save?’

‘I saved many lives. One of them was Lakshman. I also served many people and monkeys during the war.’

‘You mean, the Lakshman from the Ramayana?’ asked Shahista to confirm.

‘Yes.’

Om started thinking and as he did that, a man materialized on the screen. Long beard, saffron clothes and

lungi (an Indian outfit that was worn by ancient men), wooden footwear and a turban on the head. His surroundings were essentially plants and herbs, with a few unusual utensils and lotions in front of him and herbs diluted in water. The man looked exactly like Om Shastri. The same face, the same man he was today. The man was sitting near an unconscious body. Beside him, there was another man holding the unconscious man's hand while tears rolled down his cheeks. There were monkey-faced humans who seemed to be concerned as well. It was evident that the characters on the screen were none other than Sushen, Lord Ram, Lakshman and Hanuman.

'How is this possible? How are you alive even today?' asked Shahista as she contained her shock in order to be more straightforward.

'I haven't aged since then. I feel tired at times but without any food or rest, I get energized automatically. I get hurt, I fall ill . . . but right before death can engulf me, I start recovering again. I don't die,' disclosed Om.

The silence in the room became uncomfortable and the atmosphere turned sombre.

Shahista could hardly believe any of it, but still went ahead and asked, 'How did you look at that time?'

All of a sudden, Dr Batra stood up from his seat and screamed, 'This is bullshit! No! This is unacceptable!'

As he thundered in rage, he started walking towards the door.

Om opened his eyes and the room went dark. One of the guards switched on the light.

Dr Srinivasan and Shahista rushed to stop Dr Batra and blocked his way.

Dr Batra echoed, 'Sir, we are dealing with a mental patient here! I can't take all this anymore. He is building up

fantasies here!’

‘Why is the lie detector not beeping, then?’ Dr Srinivasan debated.

‘Because his pulse is normal. When someone tells a lie, their blood pressure fluctuates and their heartbeat shoots up. Our machine notices such changes and notifies us accordingly,’ Dr Batra answered reasonably.

‘And these images we are seeing?’ challenged Dr Srinivasan.

‘The images we are seeing are not his memories but those created by his imagination, which he thinks are real. He is obsessed with his stories and thoughts and this obsession has led him to believe that he was actually a part of all that he says. He reads his own fantasies like he has lived them,’ Dr Batra reasoned.

‘Imaginations are blurred, Batra. They can never be as clear as what we are witnessing right now. Only real incidents and people can be clearly traced in our thoughts,’ Srinivasan replied, frustrated with Dr Batra’s interruption.

‘Right! And this man thinks very strongly that all this is real. So, he never perceives anything like fiction. He believes he was present then and that he lived it all.’ Dr Batra grew even more adamant about his view of the situation.

‘Sir, it is vividly described in all the Hindu mythological books like the Ramayana. And he has studied those books so deeply that he thinks he actually belongs in them. He never realizes that he is lying. He is diseased, sir. It’s an abnormality. Cases like his are numerous across the globe,’ Dr Batra asserted.

‘The session needs to end here!’ Dr Srinivasan said, checking his watch.

‘Let us continue tomorrow. For now, assemble for dinner,’ he said as he walked away.

Within no time, the interrogation room was empty. The security team took Om to a secret place. He was handcuffed and surrounded by guards.

Later, everybody started discussing the day. When they were done with dinner, Dr Batra suddenly asked, ‘Abhilash and Parimal, tell us your views and thoughts about this case.’

‘Has anyone here heard of Ashwatthama and Parashuram?’ Abhilash was the one to reply. ‘Yes,’ replied the innocent Parimal. ‘Only heard of them, yes,’ Dr Batra informed. ‘Never heard of them!’ Shahista muttered. ‘Googled them now. Got an idea,’ the tech-savvy LSD replied.

‘Okay. The word “*parashu*” in the name signifies an axe. Parashuram literally translates to Ram with an axe. He was the sixth avatar of Lord Vishnu, the fifth son of Renuka and the sage Jamadagni. He is one of the seven Chiranjivis (a person who lives forever, an immortal) in Hinduism. Parashuram is mostly known for ridding the world of Kshatriyas (the clan of kings and warriors) twenty-one times, after the mighty king Kartavirya killed his father. The birthplace of Bhargav Parashuram is contested, although the history of his lineage is considered to be emerging in the Haihaya kingdom located in modern-day Maheshwar, near the city of Indore in Madhya Pradesh.

‘He received an axe after undertaking terrible penance to please Lord Shiva, who in turn taught him martial arts. Pleased with his extreme devotion, intense desire and perpetual meditation, Lord Shiva rewarded Shri Bhargav Ram (his original name) with divine weapons, which included the unconquerable and indestructible axe, Parashu,

and so he was named Parashuram. Lord Shiva then ordered Parashuram to liberate the earth from felons, demons and those blind with pride. Parashuram lived long enough to see the subsequent incarnations of Vishnu as Rama and Krishna. Parashuram possessed the Vijaya Dhanush, a bow of Lord Shiva given by the king of deities, Lord Indra. In the Ramayana, Parashuram had given the bow to the father of princess Sita, King Janak, for her *swayamwar* (the process of selecting the right mate and an eligible match for a princess). As a test of strength, suitors were asked to lift and string the mystic weapon. None of them was successful, except Lord Ram. But, as Lord Ram struggled to string the bow, it broke into two halves and produced a tremendous sound that reached Parashuram's ears while he meditated atop the Mahendra mountains. Infuriated, Parashuram came to confront King Ram, who, he realized, was also an incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

'Parashuram has played crucial roles in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata as the mentor of Bhishma, Karna and Drona. Drona is mostly referred to as Dronacharya. "Acharya", meaning teacher: he was the mentor of the Kauravas, who were one hundred brothers, and the Pandavas, who were five.' Abhilash was adept at explaining concepts and facts pertaining to Hinduism.

'Now, why are we going astray? Abhilash, what is the point you are driving at?' Shahista was in no mood to listen to lengthy lectures on Hinduism.

'The gist of the story is that Parashuram has appeared in every yuga and is an immortal.'

'Abhilash, it's interesting to hear all these tales from you and you recite them well. They are adding to my knowledge and might help me in the interrogation too,' said Dr Batra gratefully.

‘Thank you. This is what I have been called here for, I suppose,’ Abhilash replied rather humbly.

‘Tell me about Ashwatthama,’ said Dr Batra.

Abhilash answered, ‘Dronacharya was the royal preceptor to the Kauravas and Pandavas. He was a master of advanced military arts, including the divine weapons or Divya Astras. Arjuna was his favourite student.

‘Learning that Parashuram was giving away his possessions to Brahmins, Drona approached him. Unfortunately, Parashuram only had his weapons left. He offered to give Drona the weapons as well as the knowledge of how to use them. Thus, Drona obtained all of his weapons and his title of “acharya”, and people called him Dronacharya.’

‘Abhilash, I asked you about Ashwatthama, not some Dronacharya,’ said Dr Batra, to which Abhilash replied, ‘Sir, it is important to know about Dronacharya to understand who Ashwatthama is. Dronacharya did many years of severe penance to please Lord Shiva in order to obtain a son who possessed the same valiance as Lord Shiva himself and so came Drauni, also called Ashwatthama.

‘Ashwatthama possessed the same valour as Lord Shiva. He was a mighty fighter who fought against the Pandavas, on the Kauravas’ side. He and his maternal uncle Kripacharya were the only two survivors of the war. Ashwatthama, an invincible warrior, is believed to be the master of the science of weapons.

‘He possessed complete mastery over sixty-four forms of art and eighteen *vidyas* or branches of knowledge. Religious texts say that he will be the next Vyasa and also that he became one of the *sapta rishis*. Ashwatthama is one of the seven immortals. He is believed to be still alive.

‘He was born with a gem on his forehead, which gave him power over all other living beings lower than the humans. In fortitude, he was equal to a mountain, in energy to fire. In gravity, he was equal to an ocean, and in wrath, to the poison of the snake.

‘The gem protected him from the attacks of ghosts, demons, poisonous insects and animals. Dronacharya loved his son very much.

‘Dronacharya and Ashwatthama were loyal to Hastinapur (the kingdom of Dhritarashtra, the father of the Kauravas). Ashwatthama’s father Dronacharya was the best of all warriors. Lord Krishna knew that it was not possible to defeat Dronacharya when he had a bow and arrow in his hands. Krishna also knew that Dronacharya loved his son Ashwatthama very dearly. So Krishna suggested to Yudhishthira and other Pandava brothers that, if he was convinced that his son was killed on the battlefield, then Dronacharya would be desolate and would disarm himself in grief.

‘Lord Krishna suggested that Bhima (one of the Pandavas) kill an elephant by the name Ashwatthama and claim to Dronacharya that he had killed Dronacharya’s son Ashwatthama. After killing the elephant as advised, Bhima loudly declared that he had killed Ashwatthama. Dronacharya, however, did not believe Bhima’s words and approached Yudhishthira, the eldest among the Pandavas. Drona knew of Yudhishthira’s firm devotion to the truth and that he would never utter a lie. When Dronacharya approached Yudhishthira and questioned him as to whether his son was dead, Yudhishthira responded, “Ashwatthama is dead. But it is an elephant and not your son.” Krishna also knew that it was not possible for Yudhishthira to lie outright. On his instructions, the other warriors blew trumpets and

conches, raising a joyous noise in such a way that Dronacharya only heard that “Ashwatthama is dead”, but could not hear the latter part of Yudhishthira’s reply.

‘Out of grief, and believing his son to be dead, Dronacharya descended from his chariot, laid down his arms and sat in meditation. Closing his eyes, his soul went to heaven by astral travel in search of Ashwatthama’s soul.

‘While he was defenceless, he was executed by the Pandavas. Thus, on the fifteenth day of the eighteen-day battle, Guru Dronacharya was killed by the unfair means used by Lord Krishna and the Pandava brothers. The incident took Ashwatthama aback, and so he decided to anyhow end the chapter of the Pandavas.

‘On the last night of the war after Duryodhan’s defeat (Duryodhan was the eldest of the Kauravas, the hundred brothers), the very disturbed and restless Ashwatthama was sitting sleepless under a large tree.

‘An owl, attacking a group of crows, caught his attention. This gave him the idea of attacking the Pandavas’ camp at night. With a few surviving warriors, he attacked the camp on the eighteenth night of the war.

‘Ashwatthama burned the entire Pandava camp to ashes, leaving nothing behind. He moved on and killed many prominent warriors of their army too.

‘He also killed all five of the Pandavas’ sons, the Upa-pandavas, while they were asleep, believing them to be the five Pandava brothers. In some versions of the story, he knew that they weren’t the Pandavas but killed them anyway, because he couldn’t find their fathers. Ashwatthama believed that it was acceptable for him to attack the unsuspecting Pandavas due to his father’s death by unjust means; although he did believe his vengeance to

be justified, he was warned by people of his own side that it was not.

‘When the Pandavas returned to the camp with Lord Krishna after the night, incensed over this act , Lord Krishna cursed Ashwatthama with immortality and a diseased life till the end of Kali yuga and took the gem off Ashwatthama’s forehead, saying, “This wound will never heal!” This was the story of Ashwatthama.

‘The story is completely unbelievable, and yet the legend of Ashwatthama would make the people of Hindu faith believe it. Apparently, a 5,000-year-old man has been found living in some temples in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh! The team of Zee News visited shrines like the Liloti Nath temple, the Shivrajpur temple and the Khaireshwar temple in UP, and everywhere, the legend of this man existed. The news channel experts stayed the whole night outside the closed doors of the temples with their cameras on just to find out who comes in and offers water and flowers to the statues before the door opens. No one came, but in the early morning, when the doors were opened, they found that the prayers were already performed, with water and flowers scattered in the closed premises.

‘Locals believe that this 5,000-year-old man is actually Ashwatthama from the epic Mahabharat. In each temple, he performs puja every morning at dawn, offering water to the idols. This happens every day without fail, even when the temple doors are locked. The reporter also spoke to some doctors, pujaris and residents to verify the story.

‘There was a newspaper article more than a decade ago about a railway employee on leave. During his wanderings in the jungles of Navsari, Gujarat, he had reported a very tall man of about 12 feet with a wound on his head. He claimed to have had a conversation with him and learnt that

Bheem was much taller and stronger than him,’ Abhilash concluded.

‘These cannot be anything else but just stories. You mentioned Dronacharya in both the descriptions . . . Parashuram and Ashwatthama,’ asked Dr Batra.

‘Yes, Ashwatthama is Dronacharya’s son and Parashuram is Dronacharya’s mentor. Both of them are believed to be seen in different yugas, thousands of years apart. In fact, legend goes that there is an Indian village near Burhanpur where there is a fort called Asirgarh. According to the locals, Ashwatthama still comes and offers flowers to the Shiva linga in the fort every morning. Some other people have claimed to see Ashwatthama walking and living among the tribes in the Himalayan foothills,’ replied Abhilash.

‘Let us move towards our sleeping cabins now,’ LSD proposed. She rose from her seat immediately.

All the others left their seats along with her and walked behind Abhilash, guided by the guards.

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Chapter 8
Cryptic Chest

It was a windy night. In the dark lobby, the only source of light was the swinging lamp at the end of the corridor.

LSD bid Dr Shahista goodnight and went to her room, which was huge, but it had a damp smell. Though it was nicely decorated with ancient lamps and furniture, it seemed that it hadn’t been used for a very long time.

In the next room, Dr Shahista was worried about her children. She sat on her chair and reclined looking at the ceiling, while others were still settling in their rooms.

With time Dr Shahista’s eyes grew heavy and soon she fell asleep. Late at night, she got up with a start as she saw a shadow outside the door and felt that somebody was walking outside her room. She quickly rose from the chair and opened the door to check outside. She walked to the end of the dark corridor and realized there was nobody there. All she heard was the sound of the waves. She turned back suddenly and found LSD standing there. Dr Shahista screamed in fear. ‘What are you doing here?’

LSD gasped. ‘I was feeling scared alone, I want to stay with you. Can I sleep in your room, please?’

Dr Shahista nodded in acceptance, wiping the sweat off her forehead.

They both entered Dr Shahista's room. LSD threw her bag on the couch and started unpacking.

Dr Shahista asked, 'Did you hear someone walking around?'

LSD replied with fear, 'Yes, I saw somebody's shadow outside my window but it was dark and I had my headphones on, so I couldn't hear a thing. I am glad I couldn't.'

She giggled, 'I don't want to see or hear a ghost. I am not comfortable at these old places, they are always haunted.'

Dr Shahista put her glass of water back. She comforted LSD by contradicting her and said, 'There is no such thing as ghosts.'

Curious, LSD asked, 'I don't understand. What were you doing outside?'

Dr Shahista bit back her story about the haunting shadow, as LSD was already frightened, and said, 'I am worried about my family and I want to speak to them, but it's too late at night.'

LSD tried to console Dr Shahista. 'Relax. I am sure your family will be fine and we will be out of this very soon,' she said, crossing her fingers.

Dr Shahista took a deep breath and walked to her bed.

LSD put her glasses back, opened her screen and interrupted the silence of the room as she clicked her laptop keys. Dr Shahista fell asleep within no time.

Meanwhile, Veerbhadra had travelled to Port Blair (the capital of Andaman and Nicobar) in the dark of the night with two of his men in a speedboat to receive the delivery of the chest. As he received the chest, a pair of eyes witnessed him from a distance. Veerbhadra headed back to Ross Island, followed by the unknown spy.

The night passed.

Shahista’s sleep broke with a knock at the door and she noticed an envelope in the room. She opened it and woke LSD up. The envelope had details regarding their session’s timing. It was bright outside.

Post-breakfast, Dr Shahista and Dr Batra walked to Dr Srinivasan’s chamber, while the others proceeded to the interrogation room.

Meanwhile, Veerbhadra also entered Dr Srinivasan’s room, and looked around for Dr Srinivasan. He walked to him with two gunmen and two boxes in his hands. These were Om’s lockers.

‘Open them right here!’ Dr Srinivasan ordered Veerbhadra.

Dr Shahista and Dr Batra were there for a discussion, so they also joined in.

As the boxes opened before them, they were left astonished. The boxes contained notes written even before history began shaping itself and being recorded. Kept on some faraway land, secured, the pages were scribbled mostly in Sanskrit, apart from some that were in Hindi and Prakrit (an amalgamation of Pali and Sanskrit).

They were not the pages that one saw today. They were copper sheets. Each sheet had a name engraved on it as a header. They were the names Om had claimed to be his.

An old *kharal* (ancient stone pots used to crush and mix herbs) also emerged from the box, as also a few big, heavy finger rings, not seen or used today.

Old and rare coins, used for trade by various rulers, and more scripts jotted down in the Devanagari hand and even Urdu, surfaced.

‘Sir, there’s a piece of information I found in the locker. I personally secured it so as to hand it over to you directly,’ said Veerbhadra.

‘It’s a map, sir, with some pieces of metal, a bottle of mercury and a book.’

The book was wrapped in leaves and a white cloth with blood stains on it. The book had a metal cover and something carved on it.

Dr Batra held the book in his hands and turned the pages. His eyes grew wide and his astonishment was obvious as he saw a few diagrams in the book. He kept fumbling with the pages, as if he was searching for something. He turned and looked towards Dr Srinivasan, who stretched his hands forward as a signal. Dr Batra wanted to linger over the pages a while, but he handed the book to Dr Srinivasan.

‘Shall we proceed . . . if you are done?’ said Dr Srinivasan.

Dr Batra looked at the metal block and the map. Dr Srinivasan said, ‘Yes, it’s a map. But a map of what and which kind?’

‘The man with the answer is right here, sitting inside the room. Let’s ask him directly,’ suggested Shahista.

‘No, not now. Don’t let him know that we already have it in our custody. First, complete the list of questions you have prepared,’ Dr Srinivasan commanded.

‘Okay, sir,’ Shahista replied.

‘Send LSD to me. Veerbhadra, you stay with them. Shahista, don’t start until I come back,’ Dr Srinivasan said.

They departed, nodding, as Dr Srinivasan waited for LSD.

Dr Batra almost ran and entered the room. He looked at Om, reflecting both anger and confusion, went back to his seat and started working on the computer. Shahista walked over to Dr Batra and found him very worked up. He was curiously searching for something on his computer.

‘Tej, what are you doing?’ she asked, concerned.

Dr Batra kept working and didn’t even look up from his screen.

‘Are you okay? See, all of us are equally shocked and surpri . . .’

‘Shh . . .’ Dr Batra held up a hand, signalling Shahista to stay silent, and kept doing his work.

Shahista felt offended but stood by his side for a few seconds and then turned around to leave. Dr Batra called her back. ‘Shahista!’ She turned back, her eyes affixed on the screen. ‘Look at this.’ Dr Batra shifted the monitor in her direction. ‘What is this?’ she asked.

Dr Batra started explaining it to her.

‘Every cell in our body has tiny engines called mitochondria. They provide us with the energy we need. When these engines go down, our body starts ageing and decaying.’

‘What is the point, Tej?’

‘The point is, if these mitochondria start rejuvenating, the body may live longer than the average human,’ Dr Batra went on.

‘So, you want to say that these tiny engines never went down in Om’s body?’ Dr Shahista tried to clear her head.

Tej tried explaining it the other way round.

‘Scientists today have formulated a way to extend the lifetime of yeast, which is normally about six days, to about ten weeks. A tenfold increase, that is.’

‘And how is that related to our concern?’ Shahista was perplexed.

‘Shahista, those ten weeks are analogous to 800 years of a human life. When two genes, RAS2 and SCH9, were removed from its DNA, the yeast’s longevity came as a consequence. The same genes when removed from a mouse doubled its life span too!’ Dr Tej continued.

‘So?’ asked Dr Shahista.

‘Sixty different genes responsible for ageing the human body have already been discovered. My concern is that science still has a long way to go before claiming that it can do the same with us humans and my concern is contradictory to Om’s claim.’

‘You still think of him as deceptive?’ Shahista asked, and then said after a short pause, ‘See, Tej, I have many reasons not to trust him, but a hell of a lot of reasons not to question his credibility, too.’

‘I need a sample of his blood,’ Dr Batra said with determination.

Shahista slowly nodded. ‘Dr Srinivasan would never allow you to do that.’

Meanwhile, Dr Srinivasan was talking to LSD in his cabin.

He laid a map in front of her and asked, ‘Can you prove to me that you are indeed the best? You have six hours to solve this puzzle, which is, to find the place in the map and where the spot leads us to.’

LSD loved challenges and accepted them all with open arms, as they allowed her to test her boundaries, to improve herself and to make her even more proud of herself. Her eyes beamed with excitement. She took the map from him and turned around to walk out. Dr Srinivasan said in a rather hushed voice, ‘Keep this between us, LSD. Do not utter a word to anyone else. Your time starts now!’

After a while, Dr Srinivasan entered the interrogation room again.

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Chapter 9
Yesteryear’s Now

The next session was now to begin. As everyone settled, Shahista started the interrogation again.

‘What other roles have you been playing, apart from Sushen, in all these years?’

A rapid series of places and faces depicting various events flashed on the screen.

The person on the screen wore different traditional dresses and the places portrayed different centuries and eras. But the face of the man was never-changing, not even slightly.

Om had scrunched up his eyes as he remembered all of his life and reflected expressions of fear, uncertainty, happiness, calmness, excitement, surprise and guilt.

His eyes watered then, as something unpleasant passed through his head. He opened his eyes then to reveal they had gone blood red. As he did so, the images disappeared from the screen. He seemed hurt and terrified. When he realized they were all looking at him, he controlled himself and calmed down instantly.

However, he was distressed by the fact that his life was being watched like a motion picture by strangers and the secret would soon be known to them.

Everyone in the room saw unidentifiable visuals on the screen but could easily make out three faces. The first, beautiful and elegant, which was engraved in Om's memories, clearly was that of a lady. This face was the basis of all the hassle Om underwent. She could be often seen in distinct outfits, too.

One mark of contrast between the woman and Om was that he never ever appeared to be old, whereas she was projected in every age: as a teenager, as an adolescent, as a mature lady and as an old woman. The lady's lifeless body was projected as being in three different ages, accompanied by Om in three different attires. When she was seen as being dead for the third time, Om opened his eyes.

The second face that appeared repeatedly was that of a man with a strong build, carrying a bow and numerous arrows, and an axe-like weapon called parashu, apart from some other ancient, massive weapons.

The third visage was also a strong one. His expression was full of rage and he seemed ready to combat anything with no sense of fear.

'Who are they?' asked LSD.

'Parashuram and Ashwatthama, two of the immortals of our mythology,' said Abhilash.

'Two?!' exclaimed LSD in disbelief.

'There are seven immortals in Hindu mythology. There are five others besides those two,' replied Abhilash, still looking at the screen.

'Who are they?' asked LSD again.

While a series of unrelated visuals kept changing on the screen, making no sense, Abhilash continued speaking to LSD and looking at the screen to find some relevance and connectivity to his wisdom.

‘The other immortals are: King Bali. After the arrogance of Asura king Mahabali, he was crushed by the Vamana avatar of Lord Vishnu and was sent to live in Patal loka. But Bali was allowed to come to earth once a year. That day is celebrated as Onam in Kerala.

‘Vibhishan, the younger brother of Ravana. Vibhishan helped Lord Ram, who blessed him with immortality. Rajasthan’s town of Kota has a temple dedicated to Vibhishan. It is the only such temple in India!

‘Ved Vyas, the writer of Mahabharata. Ved Vyas is also immortal.

‘Kripacharya, the guru of the Kauravas and Pandavas.

‘And lastly, Lord Hanuman, the immortal who protects his devotee in Kali yuga.’

All were astounded to see the events unfolding before them, except Shahista. In her experience performing hypnotism, she had seen patients in an even higher degree of distress than Om. So none of it came as a shock to her.

She kept one hand on Om’s hand to soothe and calm him.

‘Om, who else have you been living as all these years, other than Sushen? Answer slowly, one after another. Take your time and keep calm.’

Om looked at Shahista and then closed his eyes before he started speaking again.

In the woods away from the facility, two eyes in a face mask were fixed upon something, like those of an eagle on its prey, and were waiting for something to happen. The person was equipped with modern war weapons and hi-tech devices.

In a distant room, a pair of old eyes were staring at a white screen which showed the inside of the laboratory in the facility where the team and Om sat. The man held a

rudraksha mala (a string made of rudraksha beads) in his hands. He picked up a cellular phone and pressed the redial button, as his eyes were fixed on the screen. He waited several seconds and then saw Dr Srinivasan pick up the phone, nod his head, and calmly say, ‘Yes, sir.’

Back in the interrogation room, the screen showed a man, cap-a-pie adorned in gold, surrounded by servants and maids in a palace. He had Om’s face. The palace was royal and elite. Om mumbled continuously as the images flew by on the screen.

He was saying, ‘I have experienced all the colours of life. I have been rich and famous, with people craving to serve me, greet me with honour. On the other hand, I have been in rags too.’

The visuals now portrayed Om as shivering in the cold, with barely any clothes on his body. The infrastructure showed without a doubt that a time gap of a century existed between the two consequent scenarios.

‘I have been an emperor. I have been a slave.’ The pictures showing Om in all these roles flowed on the screen.

Thereafter, Om was seen alone in some woods, clueless and petrified.

‘I have been a frightened and solitary person. I have been a loved man. I have also been a brave and fierce warrior.’

Now, Om could be seen with a baby, horrified and handicapped, in his lap and the same pretty lady beside him. The image stood still for what seemed like an eternity. Then, Om opened his eyes that had gone moist. A tear rolled down his cheek, undisturbed. The first person Om saw was Dr Shahista, who was also moved but said nothing.

Om calmed down and started again, more practically and less emotionally.

‘I have been Govindlal Yadav and Protim Das and

B.C. Chakraborthy. I have been Venkata Ramanna Rao and later, I lived as my own son with the name Madhukar Rao. I have lived as Gursheel Singh and as S.P. Reddy. Adhiraiyan is also one of my several identities.’ The screen had been blank as he said this.

Abhilash leaned in towards Shahista and said, ‘Ask him more about Vishnu Gupt.’ Shahista looked at Dr Srinivasan and got a silent consent.

‘You took many names, but we already have them. They are all over the government records. But there is one name you didn’t mention: Vishnu Gupt,’ Shahista questioned.

A blurred image occupied the screen that got clearer every moment.

The Om now being projected was a bald one with only the typical Brahmin lock of hair. Lord Vishnu’s sign, a ‘U’, appeared on the man’s forehead. He wore a simple white stole and a dhoti (a traditional garment worn in ancient times).

Om began, ‘I was the chief advisor to Chandra Gupt Maurya. One of the most important members of his council, I was also a good friend to him. I advised him in his personal and political affairs, apart from the issues of our warfare. I was also known by the name Chanakya.’

As Om uttered this, the snapshot on the screen became clear and they realized that it was Chanakya himself without a second of doubt. Parimal was calculating something as Om spoke and as they finished, he took a piece of paper, stood up and walked across the room to Dr Batra. The heading on the page said, ‘The time gap between the lives of Sushen and Chanakya and the period between Chanakya’s era and the present day.’

Dr Batra, after pondering over it for a while, said, ‘That is what I am saying: impossible, unbelievable!’ Then he stood up and took the page to Dr Srinivasan.

Dr Srinivasan had a close look at the paper on which was scribbled in a nearly illegible hand:

SUSHEN AT 7292 bc, CHANAKYA AT 321 bc, A TIME LAPSE OF 6971 YEARS
CHANAKYA AT 321 bc—PRESENT DAY 2017—A TIME LAPSE OF 2338 YEARS
SUSHEN AT 7292 bc—PRESENT DAY 2017—TOTAL TIME LAPSE OF 9309 YEARS

He managed to comprehend it and stood up with a sigh. ‘Continue the interrogation. Do not wait for me,’ he said, looking in Shahista’s direction.

Meanwhile, LSD was lost in digging out meaning from the map with the help of her gadgets by locating and connecting the map and using the ancient codes, rotating it in all directions. It was evident from her curiosity and expressions that she was just a shuffle away from decoding the place the map depicted. This would be another real breakthrough for the team.

In the woods, the man took out a device from his bag and split it into four portions. The four independent devices, after being set free on the land, rolled into four different directions and placed themselves near the four corners of a nearby building. The man then pressed a button on his tablet and a 3D image of the building appeared on the tablet. The image was obstructed by red dots moving here and there, which were people. The man could now keep an eye on each person entering and leaving the establishment.

With the piece of paper stating just a part of Om's total life span, Dr Srinivasan walked the corridor, confused and disoriented. He soon stood abreast a heavy glass door and flashed his ID. The door slid open and let him in.

After a short while, he found himself in front of another door being watched over by a couple of guards. The door opened only after the retina scan of Dr Srinivasan. The doors parted and let him in.

Inside the laboratory, Shahista was saying, 'Do you even realize the meaning of what you narrated? You are trying to convince us that you were alive . . .' She was interrupted by Om.

'In Treta yuga.'

'And you were also alive in Chandra Gupt Maurya's reign?'

'In the Kali yuga . . . I am still alive, and I'm not trying to convince anyone of anything.'

Shahista took a deep breath and replied patiently, 'Om, all these periods add up to a total of thousands of years. You want us to believe that you have been alive since the time of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata?'

'I have been alive since the Satya yuga, through the Treta yuga and Dwapara yuga and now I'm in front of you in the Kali yuga,' Om replied with a heavenly grin.

Abhilash was keenly listening to Om. He interrupted, 'Who were you in the Dwapara yuga?'

Om looked at him and then back at Shahista before closing his eyes, and said, 'I had many names in history, but one of them that belonged to the Dwapara yuga was Vidur.'

The image on the screen provided the proof that Om's words were facts, simply stated. Om appeared in a rich outfit, embellished in golden ornaments that hung low on his chest and a golden crown to add to his majesty.

He stood beside a seemingly blind man, who appeared to be sitting on the king’s seat beside a blindfolded woman, presumably the queen. The blind king and the blindfolded queen were King Dhritarashtra and his wife Queen Gandhari, the parents of the Kauravas.

‘Vidur! The stepbrother of King Dhritarashtra and Queen Gandhari!’ Abhilash exclaimed. Abhilash bowed his head, joined his hands in respect and questioned humbly, ‘Which means you have really met Lord Krishna? Did he actually stay at your house in Dwapara yuga?’

Shahista continued before Om could react to the remark.

‘Since when have you been alive? Tell us all that you remember and have been through.’

Om took a deep breath and Shahista sensed his helplessness in it. He knew he was trapped and couldn’t do much about it. So, he started.

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Chapter 10
Outdated Deciphered

Meanwhile, Dr Srinivasan had entered a place that was deliberately concealed. The room, with glass walls, had been carefully disguised. He had brought with him the book that they had found in Om's locker and he handed it to the old man. The old man's eyes beamed with excitement as he took the book and started turning its pages. But soon, the happiness turned into fury. After a long silence, the man spoke in a trembling voice, 'Where is the other half of this book?'

Dr Srinivasan stood confused and scared. He had thought the book was complete, though in a language incomprehensible to any of the members in the facility and with weird diagrams, maps and plants, not easily understandable. Before he could say it all to the man, the man shouted in rage, almost screeching, 'I said, where's the second half of this book?'

Dr Srinivasan replied hurriedly, 'Sir, I don't know, sir. This is the only book we discovered from the lockers.' He was terrified.

The old man slowly twisted his fingers and gestured to Dr Srinivasan to come closer to him. Dr Srinivasan obeyed and kneeled on the floor near the man's worn-out chair.

The old man grabbed Srinivasan by his hair, looked in his eyes angrily and said, ‘Look at this. Read this, you illiterate. Every alternate page in this book is missing.’ He shoved the book in Dr Srinivasan’s face. ‘All the even numbered pages are intact here and all the odd numbered pages lie in the second book. This is a trick, so that the books are useless without each other. Where is the other book now?’

Dr Srinivasan could see no page numbers but surrendered quickly, saying, ‘This is all we could get, sir. Dr Batra understood this book as soon as he looked at it.’

The old man replied, disgusted, ‘He understood things by looking at the diagrams of DNA and the extraction of genes from it. He can comprehend things but cannot conclude anything with this damned book even if he manages to read and understand the language. No one can come to a result with this book, because it is not complete. What else did you get from the lockers?’

‘Sir, everything we found was sent to your personal laboratory, except a map which I handed over to LSD in order to decrypt,’ Dr Srinivasan said with a dry throat.

At the mere mention of a map, the old man’s eyes glittered.

‘Map? That map is the key to the other book. How long will she take to decode it?’ he asked rudely.

‘I do not know, sir.’

‘Then ask her and tell me right away.’

‘Sure sir.’

Dr Srinivasan left the room in haste, feeling insulted and terrified.

Far off, in the woods, another man, his face similarly masked, joined the first one, with an ancient key in his hand. They were about to raid the building they were keeping a close eye on. Both set their watches to the same

time and one of them showed another the internals of the building, the moving red dots, and signalled to the entrance that they had to ambush in order to break into the building. They decided on how many people each would take down before meeting at the common point, a door in the building, without speaking at all.

Back in the interrogation room, just as Om was about to answer Shahista's question, LSD shrieked, 'YES!' as she shot both her hands up in the air, as if declaring herself the winner of some unannounced marathon. The guards, out of shock, turned their guns in her direction, on alert. All the heads turned towards her and Dr Srinivasan entered the room. LSD looked around and realized what she had done. When she looked at Dr Srinivasan, her expression changed. Suddenly, she did not feel like a winner but a little girl who had broken her mother's favourite vase. She looked at Dr Srinivasan terrified and apologetic at the same time. She was so scared that tears welled up in her eyes.

Shahista stood up to console her but Dr Srinivasan stopped her from doing so.

He walked up to LSD and took her hand to take her out of the room.

When they crossed the door, he asked, 'Why did you scream?'

'Because I deciphered the map you gave me, sir.'

'Good. I was coming to you for it. Where is it?'

'Sir, actually, in the map, they deliberately exchanged the latitude and longitude values of the location. The degrees and the decimals above that were interchanged; the water bodies were converted to landscapes and vice versa, so that the location couldn't be easily determined.'

'LSD, I am not in the least interested in this. Just tell me the location,' Dr Srinivasan said rather impatiently.

LSD rushed inside the room again, jotted down something on a piece of paper from her screen, and came back within a minute.

She handed over the slip to Dr Srinivasan, and said, ‘These are a series of mountains, woods and caves in Sri Lanka and this is the exact location in the map.’ She pointed to a spot. ‘It’s an old cave-like structure.’

‘Okay, go back inside,’ was all Dr Srinivasan said.

LSD didn’t get her part of the much deserved appreciation for the great job she had done. But she was a self-motivated girl and praise didn’t matter much to her.

She nodded silently, said under her breath, ‘Okay, sir,’ and walked back into the room.

Dr Srinivasan took a sigh of relief with the paper in his hand and rushed to the secure vault of the old man.

Om Shastri continued with his answer in the lab.

‘One day, I opened my eyes in a hut with three old rishis. The hut was big and crowded with followers from outside.

‘I saw them from the holes of the mud walls. One of the rishis came to me and asked, “How are you feeling, son?”’

As Om narrated the incident, the picture started playing on the screen, wherein a fair and tall man, above fifty years of age, stood smiling. He was wearing a plain white kurta and a dhoti, with a pair of wooden slippers. Red and yellowish threads circumvented his right wrist, while a white thread ran from his left shoulder to his right waist and back again.

‘I can never fail to recall them and the first flashes with them, as they are the first people I saw in my life.’

‘“I am feeling hungry, sir. Where am I?”

‘“Before you ask where you are, you must ask who you are,” the rishi replied with a smile.

‘I wanted to tell them who I was, but I then realized that I didn’t know it myself,’ Om confessed.

‘“Who am I?” I asked them.’

‘So that is why you said that you don’t know your real name when we asked you about it,’ Abhilash intervened and had to bear the stares of Shahista and Dr Batra for interrupting Om. Abhilash read their looks and immediately understood that he had to remain silent. Om continued and the screen too followed him.

‘As the old rishi entered the room, the others touched his feet and bowed in front of him with reverence. The revered rishi sat beside me and put his hand on my head.

‘“Why don’t I remember anything?” I asked.

‘“Because you don’t need to; you are forty years old. Consider today as your first day in this world. You need rest now as you have many wounds in your body, some freshly stitched. So don’t exert yourself,” the rishi said.

‘I was lying on the bed and still could see scars and stitches on my hands and chest.

‘“I am hungry,” I said.

‘“I know, son. But you can’t be fed. You will have to stay hungry. Now, you must sleep,” the rishi told me.

‘One of the other rishis signalled something, and he came immediately with a liquid in an earthen flask. I gulped it down in haste as it was to quench my thirst. After a while, I fell asleep.

‘When I woke up, it was dark outside. I thought I had slept for a few hours, but later, I was told that I had been in a deep slumber for 150 days, that is, nearly four months. It was raining when I had slept, which proved that they were right because when I woke up, I was chilled to the bones. I was still famished and nothing in the hut had changed. All

the three rishis still sat working by the fire, with herbs and solutions.

‘I found myself lying on a mat on the floor. My body was still covered in stitches and cuts. The senior rishi entered the hut again and everyone bowed to him.

‘He accepted their greetings and looked at me. He came to sit next to me and handed me a large vessel. Another rishi came and poured water in it till it was full. I knew nothing as to what should be done with it.

‘He guided my face above the vessel and then, for the first time ever, I saw my reflection. My face was covered with cuts and stitches. My almost bald head exhibited signs of the battle I must have been a part of. One of my eye sockets was melted and the other one was surrounded by a dark patch. I was terrified to see that my right ear was missing. I looked horrendous, similar to a demon.’

The visual of Om on screen was so disturbing that Dr Shahista and LSD had to look away. Nothing on his face looked normal, every feature was deformed.

‘“How do you feel, son?” the rishi asked me.

‘“Who are you?” I countered.

‘“I am Devodas, also known by the name of Dhanvantari. You can call me Kasiraja. That is what they all call me. Now, tell me, how are you feeling?” Kasiraja replied with an amiable smile.

‘“I am hungry,” I repeated.

‘“I know, but there are two more full moons to go before you can eat anything solid. Till then, you must learn to endure the hunger. You must take only the potions that the sages prepare.”

‘“How will I sustain myself? I will die!” I argued.

‘“You will get through as you have done for the past four months. As a matter of fact, if you eat something, you will

surely die. Now, you must rest," said the humble rishi.

'Kasiraja walked to the door to leave the hut, when I asked, "Tell me, who am I? What is my real name?"

'He turned back and said, "You didn't have a name in the past. At present, you will go by the name Mrityunjay and will have many names in the future."

'Kasiraja then left the hut and called out, "Sushruta!"

Everyone looked at each other's faces in surprise as they heard Sushruta's name from Om. Everything spoken about Sushruta was making sense. The ten sages, Dhanvantari, the Himalayan series, the knowledge of medicines, everything was in front of the team, on the screen.

'One of the three sages in the hut was Sushruta. He stood up and called out, "Ji Gurudev!" and left the hut too.

'After a while, Sushruta came back with a flask in his hands. He came and handed it to me. The solution smelt like mint and was green in colour. I was too ravenous to resist anything edible. So I consumed it in a single gulp. He watched me with pity in his eyes and a smile on his face. He was older than me. After a few days, he told me that he was forty-nine years old. Dhanvantari was almost seventy years old.

'After I drank whatever it was, Sushruta took it from me and said, "I am Sushruta, one of the ten sages Kasiraja has selected to impart the knowledge of Ayurveda to. We are the first three descendants of Kasiraja. Right now, we are residing in the Himalayan ranges. He is Devdrath and that is Nagendra."'

As Om spoke, everything was as clear as if it was happening right in front of their eyes. Dhanvantari looked godly but aged, Sushruta had a long beard and a calm face. Nagendra and Devdrath were clean-shaven, all wearing the

same kind of old, traditional outfit with wooden footwear called *khadau*.

‘When Sushruta was talking to me, Devdrath came in carrying a bundle of banana leaves and handed them to Sushruta. I didn’t speak a word and just heard their conversation.

‘“Mrityunjay, I have to size all your scars on these leaves so that we can perform the surgery and remove them,” Devdrath said.

‘He took the measures and prepared some Ayurvedic medicine and herbal solutions and applied them to my wounds. With passing time, I started recovering. I got well-acquainted with them as I shared the hut with them for months.

‘As time passed, I started helping them in their daily chores and learnt from them. I knew nothing about myself and the world and so I started learning everything I could among them. While helping them, I gained knowledge of the Ayurvedic system of medicine.

‘Sushruta was the first descendant of Dhanvantari. Apart from practising medical science, he was given a crucial task. The assignment was to compile the teachings of Guru Dhanvantari, add more to it with his own experience and build a series of books, which in today’s world is known as . . .’

‘Sushruta Samhita!’ exclaimed Dr Batra from behind Om. Om paid no heed and went on.

‘Sushruta Samhita is an important classic Sanskrit text on surgeries by Sushruta, and is one of the three foundational texts of Ayurveda. It has been divided into two parts— Purva Tantra and Uttar Tantra—in 184 chapters containing the description of 1,120 ailments, sixty-four

preparations from mineral resources and fifty-seven preparations based on animal sources.’

Shahista whispered to LSD, ‘Parimal mentioned this name Sushruta and you read out things about him while Abhilash was trying to prove the superiority of his mythology over science. Who is Sushruta?’

‘Sushruta is said to have been a physician originally from south India active in Varanasi. He used to use the dead bodies floating on the Ganges river to perform and practise things that no one ever dared to do, like adding body parts from one dead body to another. One of the earliest known mentions of the name is from the Bower Manuscript (fourth or fifth century), where Sushruta is listed as one of the ten sages residing in the Himalayas. The Sushruta Samhita was later translated into Arabic and then to English, based on which the modern science of plastic surgery was made, written and performed. It won’t be an exaggeration at all to say that Sushruta was the first plastic surgeon of the world,’ Dr Batra replied in a hushed voice.

‘And who is this Dhanvantari whom we saw on screen, whom Om mentioned?’ asked Shahista with a lot of curiosity.

‘Kasiraja, Devodas and Guru Dhanvantari are all the names of one person. Dhanvantari is believed to be the god of Ayurvedic treatments,’ Abhilash elaborated.

‘It is said that he reappeared as Devodas, “The Prince of Banaras”, and is also known as Kasiraja,’ LSD joined in the conversation.

Abhilash carried on, saying, ‘Dhanvantari relieved the other gods of old age, diseases and death, too. He enlightened ten sages with the skill of surgery on his Himalayan retreat.

Sushruta was considered by Dhanvantari as his best pupil and so he also taught him other divisions of Ayurveda.

‘Dhanvantari is regarded as the almighty of all the branches of medicine. There is a voluminous glossary in *Dhanvantari Nighantu*, the most ancient text available in its field.

‘We worship Dhanvantari for good health, especially on the occasion of Dhanteras (one of the days that is counted as part of the festival of Diwali in Hinduism), which is considered the birthday of Dhanvantari,‘ Abhilash narrated.

Back in the old man’s room, Dr Srinivasan heaved a sigh of relief while handing the map and the piece of paper with the location jotted on it, to the old man, who praised Dr Srinivasan for the rapid results. Dr Srinivasan hadn’t recovered from the trauma he had experienced when he last came into this room.

The old man, being thoroughly absorbed in the enthusiasm of the accomplishment, didn’t notice Dr Srinivasan’s gloom and ordered him the same task. The new task for Dr Srinivasan was to send Veerbhadra to the location marked on the map and bring back whatever he found straight to him. Dr Srinivasan silently collected the map from the old man and left the room.

After a while, the masked men in the woods saw Veerbhadra walking out of the facility. The three-dimensional view on their screens showed the facility where Om was being kept hostage. The location where Veerbhadra was heading to was in Sri Lanka. Ross Island, being the extreme south of India, wasn’t very far from the spot. Veerbhadra ordered one of the guards to arrange a private chopper because he was given very little time to finish this job.

The men saw a map clutched in Veerbhadra’s hand and guessed the development instantly. They were compelled to

alter their plans. They now decided that one of them would follow Veerbhadra and the other would keep an eye on the happenings in the building.

One of them gave a part of his weapon to the other and left to follow Veerbhadra. The chopper in the air was being shadowed by an advanced speedboat on the waters below.

The discussion between Parimal and Abhilash stopped midway as Dr Srinivasan returned to the interrogation room. As he entered, his image flashed on the screen, which proved that Om recognized his presence with closed eyes.

As Dr Srinivasan saw his image, he babbled with irritation, ‘Why am I on the screen? What is going on here? Why don’t you guys do sincerely what you have been called for and return to your respective homes?’ he thundered.

His behaviour was unexpected and left everyone stunned. Dr Shahista and Dr Batra came closer to him to ensure he was alright, but Dr Srinivasan didn’t entertain them and sent them back with a swift movement of his hand.

Om was staring with a wild expression at Dr Srinivasan and closed his eyes again as he saw Shahista walking back towards him. Shahista sat and signalled to Om to go on.

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Chapter 11
Mrit-Sanjeevani

‘It took more than a year to compile the Sushruta Samhita. Every day, without fail, Sushruta dictated and Nagendra wrote it all for hours together, starting early in the morning. Devdrath assisted them with everything they needed, along with nursing me as I had undergone a lot of surgeries all throughout my body. Those were plastic surgeries, as you all call them today, so I needed a lot of care and attention.

‘After I recovered, I helped Devdrath, apart from listening to Sushruta and Nagendra. Kasiraja often visited us to make sure I was recovering and to keep track of the progress of the book.

‘As time passed, I became a part of the place. I was living a peaceful life. All my scars vanished gradually. There was something that troubled me. Each night, Sushruta went to Kasiraja’s hut for quite some time and no one else was allowed to enter it then.

‘So one day, I asked Devdrath, “Why does Sushruta go to Guruji’s hut every night?”

‘Devdrath replied with equal incorruptibility, “I wonder the same. Moreover, I asked him once, but he refused to tell me.”

‘Nagendra was attending to us, and so he replied, “He goes to take notes for Mrit Sanjeevani.”

‘Both of us looked at him and then Devdrath asked him, “If this is true, how do you know about it?”

‘Nagendra replied, “I followed him many times and have seen him writing the procedures of Mrit Sanjeevani.”

‘“What is Mrit Sanjeevani?” I asked.

‘“Mrit Sanjeevani is a miraculous procedure of bringing the dead back to life,” Devdrath said.

‘“But they say that no one can do that! Only the gods hold the power of giving life,” I said childishly.

‘Devdrath replied, “Kasiraja is a god himself and—”

‘“And I’ll be the next,” Nagendra interrupted.

‘“The good news is that, dreams will always be free of cost,” Devdrath said.

‘“Has Mrit Sanjeevani been practised? Or is just theoretical so far?” I asked.

‘“Why do you think you are alive? We saw you dead a year ago. If Mrit Sanjeevani had been a theory, you would have been reduced to ashes long ago,” Nagendra said with a harsh tone which appeared full of hatred. I had never felt comfortable around Nagendra, but this was no time to ponder petty issues. I was jolted by the news I had just received. That I was a lab rat, an experiment, and the only successful one. That moment, I stopped feeling like

a normal human being. A sense of inferiority arose in me.

‘“How did I die?” I asked.

‘I read Devdrath’s face, which revealed that he was not supposed to let it slip. It also showed anger towards Nagendra for bringing this up, but being the weakest of the three sages, he didn’t mouth his anger. Numerous questions had clouded my mind and my relief lay with Devdrath.

‘“We don’t know that. When we saw you first, you were dead,” Devdrath said, smashing my expectations.

‘“Where did you find me?”

‘“We don’t know where you died but yes, we know where you were born,” he replied sarcastically.

‘“Tell me! Maybe I can get some answers there,” I was hopeful.

‘“In Dhanvantari’s hut. There,” he pointed, “where Sushruta is writing the procedure of ‘How to make a second Mrityunjay’,” he burst out laughing.

‘For the first time, I had many feelings growing in me, the negative ones, specially.

‘Devdrath tapped my shoulder and said, “We don’t have the answers to your questions but Sushruta knows. Maybe he will tell you when the time comes.”

‘I always obeyed them. In fact, I never had an urge to disobey them until this moment.

‘After a while, Sushruta returned to find Devdrath and Nagendra fast asleep. My questions haunted me and kept me from sleeping, so I was wide awake. I wanted to know about myself, my life, my death and everything else.

‘Sushruta saw me and realized that something was not right. He came and sat beside me and stroked my hair with his fingers. “Why are you not asleep?” he asked out of concern.

‘“Who am I?”

‘Sushruta comprehended within a moment as to what might have happened while he was away. He handled the situation with diplomacy, saying, “You are Kasiraja’s son. He gave you your life back as a gift. You are my younger brother. That is all you must know for now. Tomorrow is a big day for all of us and you should sleep.”

‘“What is Mrit Sanjeevani?” I pushed.

‘As the name hit his ears, he shot an angry glance in Nagendra’s direction and then replied with a sigh, “That is how we saved you, Mrityunjay. You do not need nutrition or water for survival now. You may have them, but they are not a necessity for you anymore, unlike us. You will not age, now or ever, which is why you have been named ‘Mrityunjay’: *mrityu* (death), *vijay* (victory); the one who conquered death. You are not only a complete human being but far more advanced than normal humans, an enlightened version of this mankind.”

‘I was dazed by this revelation. Sushruta understood my confusion and went on, “Okay, think of it this way. We are all bound to a time circle. Time that neither reverses nor rests. It is the ship in which every being navigates. Time is the driving force of every life. Each life present on this earth has a timeline and an age. But you, my brother, have fallen out of this circle. The divinity of time can’t see you. You are undetectable to its eyes. Time, in you, has been put to a halt, my friend. For this moment, time sees me, and deducts a second from my lifespan. Time passes through me constantly but is constant for you. Time sees me talking to somebody, but it wonders whom I am talking to. Therefore, I will age continuously and will die someday. But you won’t. This is what Mrit Sanjeevani is. And you are blessed to be Mrityunjay.

‘“This book is a boon if in the right hands, for those people who are able to distinguish between who should walk upon the earth forever, serving mankind, and who should be erased. Similarly, this book is a curse when in the wrong hands; it’s a treacherous weapon. That’s why it is being safeguarded by Shri Kasiraja. I am revealing this to you because our reason behind this hideout is resolved. The objective, which was to complete Mrit Sanjeevani, has been

achieved. Gurudev will instruct us soon to pack our belongings, and move back to our respective capitals to serve mankind with the knowledge we have obtained from him.”

‘“What about Mrit Sanjeevani? Where will I go now? And what will Kasiraja do next?” I flooded him with questions.

‘“Guruji hasn’t informed me yet. He will tell me whatever we need to know at the right time, but I believe that Guruji will retain you with him as you are his creation, his son.”

‘I had some more doubts to be cleared, but before I could clear my head, Sushruta continued, “It’s too late to talk now. We must sleep. Tomorrow is an important day. Don’t worry. We will have enough time to talk tomorrow. You have waited for so many months. I’m sure you can wait for a night more. Good night, Mrityunjay.” Sushruta concluded the conversation, leaving me waiting for the morning.

‘While I was asleep, I heard a disturbance in the hut. I managed to open my eyes and saw Devdrath and Nagendra leaving the hut. It was dawn. I then heard Kasiraja order them to prepare a feast for everyone. After a while, Nagendra came back, and took with him some leaves from beneath his cot. I fell asleep again.

‘When I woke up, Guruji directed everyone to gather outside his hut. He came out and addressed us, “Sages, dear sons, I have bestowed upon you all the knowledge I could have. It is time for you all to go back to your cities, save and serve others of our kind. You are the few to become the first saviours and surgeons. You have been the best of apprentices and so, I have ordered a feast for all of you before you depart. I would want to see each one of you here again after a year to gather new knowledge for further research.”

‘Kasiraja seated the seven sages for the feast prepared by Devdrath and Nagendra, whom he now ordered to serve the food. He then gestured to Sushruta and me to follow him into his hut.

‘“Sushruta, you are my most obedient and favourite son. For everyone else, the job is done but for you, it has just begun,” Kasiraja said.

‘“Guruji, my place is at your feet. It would be my honour to follow your instructions. Please go on.”

‘“I have not trained you to stay here and serve me. Your real purpose is out there, to save and serve people. Your name will be written in golden letters in the field of medicine. Reach out to the needy and perform your duties, but I have some more responsibilities to assign to you,” Gurudev replied with an amiable smile.

‘“Tell me, Guruji. I will do it with full faith and devotion.”

‘“Take Mrityunjay and Mrit Sanjeevani along with you. Mrityunjay should learn the ways of the world. You are best suited to teach him that. Keep him with you for the whole year before returning here again and look after him like your own son.”

‘Sushruta’s eyes had filled with tears. Controlling his emotions, he replied, “Guruji, I wanted the same, but could not ask you. You have always understood everything without me saying it. I take full responsibility for him from this day forward.”

‘“Also, Sushruta, Mrit Sanjeevani will not be safe here. The word will soon spread that Mrit Sanjeevani has been written and evil forces will come to get it,” Kasiraja said, concerned.

‘“Guruji, this is a treasure to the world and is a result of your continuous research and untiring practice. How can I

carry it with me? It doesn’t belong to me,” Sushruta said anxiously.

‘Kasiraja calmly said, “Nor does Mrityunjay, my son! But you are the keeper of both these invaluable godsends. They are safer in your hands than with any of the immortals’.”

‘I just stood there, listening to them.

‘“As you wish, Guruji. What do you want me to do with it?” Sushruta gave in.

‘“Take an oath to keep this book safe until you hand it over to me. Mrityunjay will help you,” Kasiraja instructed.

‘Sushruta promised to keep the majestic book safer than his own life.

‘I watched as Kasiraja handed over the Mrit Sanjeevani to Sushruta, and heard him say, “Now, you may leave, and enjoy the feast with the rest of your brothers.”

‘“Guruji, there is a request I want to make before taking your leave,” Sushruta politely said.

‘“Yes?”

‘“Guruji, Mrityunjay is very anxious. He wants to know about his past. This is the one thing I can’t help him with. Please help him get over it or he won’t become the person you want me to make of him.”

‘Kasiraja smiled and glanced towards me. He directed me to sit close to him. I acted in accordance.

‘“What do you want to know?” he asked humbly.

‘“Who am I? Where am I from? How did I die? And how did you find me?”

‘I was interrupted by Nagendra, who entered the hut with three bowls of kheer arranged in a tray.

‘He said, “Sorry, Guruji. This is my last day here and I committed the mistake of entering without consent. I waited outside but it was taking too long. Everyone, including

Devdrath, had already feasted. So I considered bringing it here for all of you, else it might have lost its fresh taste."

'He handed a bowl to each of us. I wished he would leave soon, so I took my bowl readily, as my answers awaited me. Just as I was about to have my first sip, Kasiraja interjected.

'"No! Mrityunjay, don't! You have not eaten anything for a long time. Three hundred seventeen days, to be precise, dear. Nine more days are to pass before you can have food."

'I kept the bowl back on the tray, feeling a bit awkward. Kasiraja supped from his bowl. After taking in the first taste, he made a face and warned Sushruta not to have it. The kheer contained a poisonous herb, but before they could react, Nagendra launched an attack on Sushruta. Sushruta was the only threat who could have retaliated. Dhanvantari was too old to fight, and I was witnessing such an act for the first time in my life.

'A minute later, I saw Sushruta bleeding. He was being attacked with a knife and defending himself with his arms. Dhanvantari tried helping Sushruta and struggled to stop Nagendra, but it was in vain. Leaving Sushruta helpless and exhausted, Nagendra set upon Dhanvantari. Sushruta, without wasting a moment, ran up to the Mrit Sanjeevani books, wrapped them in a white piece of cloth, and handed them over to me. The white cloth was stained with Sushruta's blood. I was already jolted by everything happening then and this gesture added to it. Sushruta shook me hard to bring me back to reality, held my terror-stricken face in his hands and whispered,

'"Mrityunjay! Run! Run as fast as you can and as far as you can get towards the south. Wait for me down the hill for a day. If I don't turn up, proceed onwards. Protect this book with your life. Don't let anyone know that you have it. Now go, my brother. Go!"

‘He turned on his heels then and plunged over Nagendra to set Dhanvantari free. This was the last thing I saw. Then I ran like a child, scared and lonely. I paused on my way and it took me about twenty-four hours to reach my destination. I then waited for him a whole day, as Sushruta said. However, he didn’t arrive. Instead of losing hope, I began imagining that Kasiraja and Sushruta were walking down the terrain and they were taking time to reach me.

‘In this fantasy, I waited another day, and one more, and some more days. But they never appeared. When I had left Kasiraja’s hut, I had seen all the other sages sleeping under the open sky. I wandered in the Himalaya mountains for about a year. My state worsened with every passing day, without anyone to care for me. I learn to drink water and eat leaves like the animals in the rivers and forests. I got sick and starved to death and had many diseases. I even ate poisonous herbs by mistake and was attacked by wild creatures that consumed me to death, but I never died.

‘I learned the cycle of life from seeing the births and deaths of beasts. I continued wandering and one day, saw a village down a hill. I was frightened of mankind after seeing Nagendra’s act of violence for the book and did not want to go any closer. I returned to the woods and mountains and traced my way back to where I started from.

‘A year had passed. As I reached the hilltop again, I saw skeletons scattered all over the place. I then realized that the sages had not been sleeping the day I ran, but were dead. I cried like never before or ever after. I sobbed for people I knew, who were my friends, my family and my entire world. I felt like an orphan and ran from one set of remains to another, but I could not make out who was Devdrath, who Dhanvantari and who Sushruta. I thought

they might have escaped alive somehow; my heart consoled my brain.

‘I sat on my knees, face towards the sky, wondered where my creators were and prayed for their well-being . . .’

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Chapter 12
The First Outbreak

Veerbhadra had reached Sri Lanka as ordered and directed. His movements were being keenly followed by a man in disguise. A Sri Lankan guide was paid highly to escort Veerbhadra to the desired location. The guide also agreed to arrange for some ammunition for him if need be. The voyage began with twelve men in total, and one following all of them. This man called up his partner, who stayed in the woods, waiting for the right time to complete the task.

In the woods, the partner was fully prepared to launch the strike. He attended the phone, nodded a few times and said yes. Then, he disconnected. He looked up towards the sun and then at his watch, waiting for the right time.

As Om spoke in the interrogation room, Dr Srinivasan's phone rang. Everyone was disturbed by the volume of the ring. The caller ID displayed a name that couldn't have been ignored. So he indicated that they continue, and left the room, picking it up.

'Yes, Veerbhadra!'

'Sir, we are a mile away from the location and the wheels can't go any further. We are on foot now. Expect my call as I reach there,' Veerbhadra's voice echoed through the phone.

‘Veerbhadra, you are the bravest and the best fighter I’ve ever known. Get me everything you find there, undamaged. It is a matter of life and death. Please, don’t let me down.’

‘I will do my best, sir, but it would be convenient if I could know what we are looking for.’

After a short pause, Dr Srinivasan replied, ‘We don’t know that. All the best,’ and hung up.

He then went towards the chamber the old man resided in.

The old man was his usual self, angry and sick. He sat facing the screen, watching Om and the team. Dr Srinivasan told him about the call he had just attended. The old man was least interested in Veerbhadra’s progress; he just wanted to hear the result. The result for him was the second book. So he directly jumped to the right question. ‘Did he find the book?’

‘No, sir,’ said Dr Srinivasan.

‘So what are you here for?’ asked the old man.

That was discourteous, but Dr Srinivasan had no answer, so he stood silent.

Back in the interrogation room, Om continued, ‘I was lost in my thoughts and mourning for the loss of my people, when I found myself fenced by some shadows.

I brought myself up on my legs and realized that some men were hiding when I had arrived there. And now, they were approaching me. I knew that the shadows were not waiting for me.’

Shahista, for once, interrupted him and said, ‘In the mountains, if not for you, what were they looking for?’

In the woods at Ross, the man received another call from his partner informing him about the movement in Sri Lanka’s caves.

Veerbhadra had come out of the cave with a metallic chest. He called Dr Srinivasan and informed him about the chest. Dr Srinivasan ordered him to open it. Veerbhadra was now striving to open it. Both the sides went silent in anticipation of what lay inside it.

'What is it in the box?' the man from the woods whispered, waiting, like Dr Srinivasan. His partner replied with the same thing that Om Shastri revealed to Shahista and Veerbhadra reported to Dr Srinivasan.

'*The book*.'

Veerbhadra held in his hands the other half of Mrit Sanjeevani.

Dr Srinivasan shot a glance at the old man on hearing about a book. He had already known about the book when he had seen the map. The old man was busy cutting banana leaves the size of his scars when Dr Srinivasan reiterated Veerbhadra's findings to him.

'The Book,' Dr Srinivasan mouthed. The old man got distracted and looked towards him with insane excitement in his smile.

He showed signs of mental imbalance as he yelled, 'Bring me the book! Now! Hurry! How long will he take? Tell him not to stop for anything. Just bring me the book, right away!'

The old man repeated the same statements over and over again.

Dr Srinivasan was terrified and astounded at his unusual conduct. But he complied and ordered Veerbhadra to do what the old man had demanded of him. The old man had started murmuring to himself like someone who was mad. The phone got disconnected.

As soon as the man in the woods heard about the book, he got tense and his voice became heavy. The lines on his forehead deepened. He closed his hand in a tight fist, took a

deep breath, as if preparing himself for something, and said in a throaty voice over the phone,

‘Do whatever it takes to take the book in your possession. Don’t hesitate to kill anyone if need be. Come back soon. We are running out of time.’

Dr Srinivasan’s phone rang again. It was Veerbhadra, the caller ID revealed.

‘Yes, Veer?’ Dr Srinivasan answered it.

‘Sir, we have also found some equipment and apparatus out here. We have a big bow, a few arrows and their carrier, apart from a crown, a golden *kamardhani* (an ornament to be tied around the waist), some carved metallic weapons, a box full of ornaments and some gold coins. Also, we have found some equipment and apparatus, like that used in a laboratory.’

Dr Srinivasan said, ‘Bring as much you can, but Veer, the book in your hands is the priority.’ In the interrogation room, Shahista kept on going with her duty.

‘What happened next?’ she asked.

‘It had been a year. I had been alone, stranded. I had no idea what food was. I wandered in the mountains and they became my home. After a year, I was back at the place where I was born. I was among my family, the sages. Only they didn’t talk to me now. Dead people, they don’t talk.’

As he went on, the bits and pieces of his memory flashed on the screen, evidently showing the remains of people as Om remembered them and Om’s condition by then.

‘The shadows around me were close to me now and the faces more clearly visible. I was left with no will to live any longer. The men were armed and I was ready to taste what death had to offer me. So I paid no heed to them and did what I wanted to. I cried my heart out, like an orphan does for his lost parents. I knew that my days were numbered

and those people would take me far away and kill me. All through the year, I had been alone. I hadn’t changed my clothes. I had no idea how the beard had to be cleaned.

‘My feet were cracked. My hair had grown long enough to hide my face. In this attire, I could have been mistaken for a madman in the mountains. I was ready to die, but they weren’t ready to kill me. They hit me hard on my head, the world spun around me and I fainted. A few hours later, when I regained consciousness, I realized I was being held captive, tied with chains to a chair, soldiers all around me equipped with bows and arrows aimed at me.

‘The man I faced appeared to be the one on whose command the arrows would rip through me. He had been waiting for me to wake up.

‘“You will not be given a second chance. Tell me what I ask, do you understand?” The chief spoke in his hushed voice. I nodded.

‘“Who are you? Whom did the skeletons belong to? What were you doing there?”

‘I told him my name, that was all. I did not know how much should be revealed and how much should be held back. So I chose to hold back everything and said, “I don’t know how I reached there or who those people were.”

‘I came across as a madman because of the lack of manners and basic conduct. They couldn’t suspect me of anything as I carried no luggage. Within a few days, they were convinced that I was no more than a burden upon them, who had to be fed twice a day only for being useless. So they now knew that it was in their best interests to either kill me or to set me free.’

The whole team in the interrogation room was watching it all on the screen like a movie and was convinced that every word from Om’s mouth was as true as their lives.

‘One day, hence, the commander ordered one of his men to make me presentable as I was to be taken to their king. My beard was shaved and I was bathed properly, after which I was given a new pair of clothes to put on my new body. The king had decreed that I be set free, sensing no threat in my survival. As I dressed up and looked in a mirror, I recognized Mrityunjay for the first time in my life. However, my happiness faded as it dawned upon me that I was a full-grown man and was good for nothing. I was hollow inside, with no love, no hatred, no peace, no commotion, no noise, only silence. My existence or absence would not affect anyone here. Surrounding me were merry faces, both young and old, tied together by the Almighty. What could be worse than dwelling alone in this world full of people, good or bad? Tears rolled down my eyes. I couldn’t end my life because I was bound to a promise, which Sushruta had taken from me, that I would protect the book with my life. Otherwise, I had no reason to live. That one promise and those books drove life in and out of my body. I kept learning the ways of the world slowly and stealthily. I fell ill a few times, of diseases that had no cure, but I didn’t die.’

As Om revealed the fact, the images on the screen showed Om, fragile and dying, but the breaths he took were strong and healthy.

‘There was a time when I was living with a nobleman, working as his servant in exchange for food and shelter. He also used to give me some of his old clothes occasionally. My job was to take care of his children, play with them and do whatever they demanded of me. In addition, I also performed other household tasks like laundering the clothes, running the errands etc. While I played with the children, I too learnt a lot of things that they did, apart from elementary reading and writing.

‘As time passed, I became family to them. I was treated like the best of all the workers, but this didn’t last long.’

Om took a short pause. All looked at him with the same question in their eyes: why?

‘What went wrong?’ Shahista pressed.

‘I wasn’t ageing at all. It started bothering me, as everyone else was growing old with time.’

The people in the room saw it all as clearly as it was in Om’s mind. The kids could be seen growing up. The head of the family had grown feeble too, but Om never showed the slightest sign of any change.

Veerbhadra was looking at the book in his hands. It was extremely worn out. Veerbhadra had no idea how it could be so important to anyone. Just as he was pondering over the thought, he was alerted by the sound of a bullet leaving a gun. Other gunshots followed. He turned back, only to see five of his men lying dead. They had lost their lives before anyone could identify the source of the bullets. Veerbhadra ordered four of his men to run in the direction from where the bullets seemed to have originated, and catch the shooter alive. The rest, along with Veerbhadra, ran in the opposite direction towards their vehicles, with the book. This book is crucial as hell, thought Veerbhadra.

The men who ran in the direction of the shooter knew not who they were about to encounter. They only woke up to the truth seconds before their deaths. One moment they realized that they stood no chance of beating their target, and the next moment, life ran out of their bodies. The fighting skills their opponent possessed were unbeatable. He exploited the oldest of the skills of combat, and the now extinct art of fighting a war. Perhaps the death of the four men had not proved to be completely useless. It had bought time for Veerbhadra to escape with the book.

The mission of the man had failed, but it wasn’t over. As he killed those men, he knew exactly what would rectify it.

The man in the woods received a call from his partner in Sri Lanka. He answered it immediately.

‘Is it done?’

‘Negative. He got away with the book. Be prepared.’

‘How long will you take?’

‘Half an hour, less, maybe. I’m close behind them.’

‘Okay. I’m ready to engage. How many?’

‘There are three heading towards the facility. Nine are dead.’

Dr Srinivasan was halfway to the interrogation room when his phone rang. It was Veerbhadra. He answered it while turning back to reach the chamber in a hurry.

‘Yes, Veer!’ He was out of breath.

Veerbhadra was panting on the other side, terrified at how events had unfolded. He was smeared in blood. He managed to reply in a choked voice, ‘Sir, someone attacked us. Many of our men have been shot dead. Sir, something worse than we know is going on here.’

Dr Srinivasan, too, was horrified at this revelation. He had never witnessed a murder and had no idea how the situation must be handled. He doubled his strides towards the old man. He put Veerbhadra on hold. As he reached the old man, he noticed that he had been sweating profusely.

He babbled, ‘Our men have been murdered there in Sri Lanka. Veerbhadra is on the call. What is going on here? What is the worth of that book that people are dying for it? And who could possibly be an enemy to us? What are you making us do? Answer me!’ Dr Srinivasan thundered.

The old man stood up, walked up to Dr Srinivasan, and snatched the phone from him.

‘Where is the book?’ he asked.

‘The book is with me.’

‘How long will you need to reach here?’

‘Thirty minutes or so. Who are you? Where is Dr Srinivasan?’

The old man disconnected the phone without any further questions or concerns. He didn’t bother about the loss of life that had taken place.

Dr Srinivasan stood there looking at the old man’s wobbly legs. He looked from head to toe at the merciless creature that stood there, behaving insanely. Then only did he realize for whom he had been doing this through thick and thin.

The old man was now seated on his chair, collecting a few things.

Dr Srinivasan pulled himself together and approached the man, taking small steps. He grabbed the hand rest of his chair and spun him around suddenly to make the old fellow face him.

He then demanded in a beastly voice, ‘What have you put us up to? If men have been murdered there, it can happen here too. I am freezing the interrogation and other work until I get the answers I need.’

Dr Srinivasan’s eyes had gone red with fury. The old man suddenly stood up and grabbed Dr Srinivasan by his biceps, only to push him eight feet back with one swift movement of his hand. Dr Srinivasan hit the wall hard and winced in pain. The old man was far too strong and speedy for his age. Dr Srinivasan had never imagined a physical assault like this from this fragile-looking creature. The old man, for the first time, straightened his back and stood abreast of Dr Srinivasan, staring him straight in the eye. His eyes were terribly big and he didn’t blink even once. His pupils contracted and expanded remarkably as their gazes locked.

Dr Srinivasan stared in terror, and the old man in rage. Then the old man spoke calmly and politely.

‘It is not your team. It’s mine. I have paid each one of them and you too. I have had numerous servants in my life. Out of them, only those who never asked “what” and “why” have died natural deaths. You understand?’ he warned.

Without waiting for an answer, he pointed towards the screen showing the interrogation room and the people in it.

‘Look at them. See the calm on their faces. The reason behind this serenity is that they don’t know what they should not. So they are just doing what they have been told to. They hope to go back to their homes to see their families because they trust you. Now you have two choices. Either all these people go back home with their unanswered questions, or you take the answers from me in exchange for their lives.’

Dr Srinivasan ran his eyes over all their faces. He realized that some of them were younger than his own children.

Tears welled up in his eyes and the old man got his answer. He started back towards his seat, stopped at a distance, half turned and said, ‘No more questions, huh?’

Dr Srinivasan stood speechless. He left the chamber at once, turned the corner in the hallway, wiped his tears and took deep breaths. He stood there for some time to calm down. Suddenly, something struck him and he rushed to the interrogation room.

Back there, Om was speaking.

‘The word about me had spread in all directions, which soon made me the talk of the town. People looked at me like I was an extraterrestrial. I was the topic of discussion in the evening tea meetings. Then, one day, soldiers came to my master’s house and ordered him to present me before the court the next morning. I was afraid at the mention of a

court, and anyway, I knew the questions that would be put to me. As I didn't want to answer any of them, I ran from the house at night. Without bidding goodbye or exchanging words of care and affection, I simply left them. I walked out of the kingdom.'

'Where did you go then?' Shahista asked.

'I began walking south. I walked for months together, until I was accepted by wanderers. In my solitary journey, I starved for days and became frail. I had to bear many injuries, but they healed before long. I faced chronic diseases, natural disasters and extreme climatic conditions, but I didn't die. I survived all of it.'

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Chapter 13
Classified Transformation

Back in the woods, the man impatiently checked his digital watch and knew he had no more time to waste. The plan had to be executed soon. *I ought to call him for the last time*, he thought, taking his cell phone out of his pocket. He had to confirm the whereabouts of his partner before he decided to storm the facility alone. His partner rejected the call. *He must be close to the target*, the man mused. He then decided to send a voice note that said,

‘I am entering the facility as per our plan. You too stick to it.’

He then readied himself with heavy arms and ammunition, his face still hidden behind a black façade, and strode over to the entrance of the facility. Looking around, scanning for cameras, he found one at the entrance and, after checking that all was clear, shot an arrow in its direction. It hit the camera’s eye and ruptured it. He then sneaked into the building with his automated arrow shooter, a glass covering one of his eyes attached to his forehead by a ring that circumvented his head. The glass showed images of men present inside, along with a three-dimensional view of the building with all its corridors and rooms, directing him towards the cell where Om had been held captive. He could

fix his target with this glass and then shoot him with his arrows, leaving no room for mistake. He also had a belt bag tied around his waist with similar-sized pockets in the front, the sides and the rear. There was a metallic piece attached to his right hand from wrist to elbow, with a small arrow placed on its muzzle.

He carried another bag on his back with a PDW 19 assault rifle with a range of 250 feet, 40 per cent stability in its grip, a maximum zoom of twenty times, a clip size of twenty-five bullets, which took 4.50 seconds to be reloaded automatically, and two P622 pistols with a range of 150 feet, clip size of eight bullets that took three seconds to reload.

After taking a few cautious steps, he saw a guard with a gun in the other corner of the corridor. He slowly moved towards the guard. The glass displayed how far he was from the guard. He then came to a halt and stood still. The glass displayed, ‘Target reachable!’ in a bright green colour. It helped to set the hand and eye coordination between the arrow and the target. Then he shot the first arrow, which hit the target on his head. The guard fell dead instantly. He ran towards the guard, making sure not to make any noise. He checked one of the pockets of his belt bag, took out a fibre plate, set up the time on it and fixed it on the wall of a hidden corner.

He then moved forward, ready to take the next man down.

On the shores of Ross Island, a chopper landed, followed by a speedboat tearing through the sea and reaching the same spot. The man could see the chopper landing slowly. He grabbed his bag and rushed towards it. While sprinting, he loaded his weapons. As men descended from the chopper, they were welcomed with a shower of bullets.

Some recoiled and shot in the man’s direction. Veerbhadra got off the chopper and knew that the book he held was the treasure. So, without wasting any time, he looked around for his jeep, found it and rushed towards it. The man smelled Veerbhadra’s intentions and to foil them altogether, shot the wheels of the jeep and then the driver. Veerbhadra threw himself in the driver’s seat as the driver fell dead and started the engine to drive the punctured jeep to the facility. The other men engaged the shooter, not allowing him to stop Veerbhadra, even at the cost of their own lives.

Back in the interrogation room, on the screen, Om had a beard, golden earrings and a tribal crown on his head and was being venerated like a god. Om said, ‘I didn’t know how to cheat, lie or deceive people. I did not take advantage of anybody. A few old men said I was an avatar God had sent for them. They believed serving me was like serving God himself. These people had seen me recover from deadly diseases, walk out of a natural disaster unharmed. This belief continued and my life passed uneventfully for some time, but then a few young men died of some unknown disease.

People started noticing that I had not aged a day since I joined their clan. All the old men leading the tribe, who believed and worshipped me, died their natural deaths and with them died their belief. Time changed, their leaders changed too. I was now considered a curse. A curse that sucked the life out of young people to remain young. They believed I was the reason for the deaths of the young men. A few of them still had faith in me and fought for me, but the fear of darkness was dominating the light of faith. I was expelled from the tribe. They did not kill me because of the fear of a bigger curse.

‘I was alone again. Now I knew that I had to keep changing my identities and locations, as no one was mentally prepared to accept the truth.

‘Since then, I have been hiding myself, but . . .’

The door of the interrogation room opened with a bang and Dr Srinivasan entered. Om got alarmed. The sudden noise of the door drew everyone’s attention towards Dr Srinivasan. Furious, Dr Srinivasan saw Om and started walking towards him.

‘Sir, are you . . .’ Dr Batra said, and was interrupted by Dr Srinivasan, who showed him a palm, a signal to remain quiet.

Dr Srinivasan grabbed Om’s shirt with both his hands and stared at him with eyes red with anger.

‘Sir! What is wrong with you? What are you . . .’ Shahista stood up. Dr Srinivasan looked into Shahista’s eyes and she instantly knew that not saying anything was the only choice she had right now. Dr Srinivasan brought his gaze back to Om, only to find him calm and composed as usual, waiting for a question. The old man in the chamber saw all of it and pressed a panic button.

‘*Emi ayindi*, Chinna?’ Om said.

Dr Srinivasan calmed down at once upon hearing, ‘What happened, Chhotu?’ in Om’s tone and language, but the next moment, his fury returned and he replied in Telugu, ‘*Nenu* Chinna *kaadu*! *Naa manasu lo prashanalu unnai*, *naaku samadhanan kavali* (I am not Chhotu! I have questions and I want straight answers).’

‘*Sare*, Chinna kaakpote, *em ani pilvali*? *Kunju* (Okay. If not Chhotu, then what shall I call you? Kunju)?’ Om said.

‘*Naaku ala yavaru pilavaru*, *neeku ela telsindi*? *Nuvuu yavaru* (No one calls me by that name anymore. How can

you possibly know that? Who are you)?' Dr Srinivasan replied.

Om closed his eyes and the screen came back to life. The image it projected showed a few students in a classroom, seated on the wooden benches of an old, decrepit government school wearing half-pants, white half-shirts and slippers. Some of them were barefoot. They were all bullying their classmate, who was sobbing. Then Om, the teacher, entered the classroom and scolded them all for bullying the kid. He shooed all of them out of the class and sat with the innocent student, talking to him, and calmed him down.

'*Neeku adi gurtunda* (Do you remember that)?' Om said calmly.

Dr Srinivasan's eyes welled up with tears and he cried like a kid again. He was compelled to believe in the impossible after seeing his own childhood with Om. He now believed everything Om had said and saw him with compassion and respect.

The others in the room were clueless as to what was happening due to their lack of knowledge of Telegu.

Dr Shahista came near both of them, just as LSD's computer beeped.

She looked at the screen, which went blank for a second, before the old man's face appeared on it. LSD got alert and pressed enter on the keyboard once. Her screen now displayed a digital watch. 8:43, it read, and the countdown started with each passing second. Her eyes went wide and she saw Parimal.

He was already looking at her. He had received the same beep and the same face with the same timer. Parimal moved a few steps towards Abhilash's bench and put a hand on his shoulder. Suddenly, the jolly and careless hacker changed into a mature and sincere adult. That childish face

vanished in the dark. The introverted, silent and scared Parimal suddenly became hyperactive.

As the distance between the jeep and the facility reduced to less than 2 kilometres, the man decided to start running to follow Veerbhadra after he had killed all his men. He now chased him. Veerbhadra, on the other end, reached with the punctured jeep and entered the building. His body was full of injuries and his face was red, with blood smeared over it. He panted heavily as he entered the facility and called Dr Srinivasan. The armed security guards surrounded him to guard him and were on high alert.

In the interrogation room, Dr Srinivasan asked, ‘What’s in the book?’

Om smiled with the faith that the books were safe at the place where he had hidden them himself. He was unaware of the fact that the books were at Ross Island, like him.

‘Those books are the answers to the biggest secret in the world, death. They hold what men have not yet discovered. They contain the key to immortality. They describe the process of making a man similar to me. Time keeps an account of every second in everyone’s life. So you age every day. The books have the ability to make you fall off the vision of the almighty time. Imagine you don’t exist for time. For you, death is an illusion. For the one who passes through the book, life will be forever.’

Dr Srinivasan’s phone rang just as he was trying to comprehend what Om had said. It was Veerbhadra. He answered.

‘Sir, I have the book. I am now entering the facility. Someone followed us to the island. Where are you, sir?’ he said, almost out of breath owing to the rush.

Veerbhadra’s voice screeched through the phone so that Om heard every word of what he had said.

Om’s shock was evident on his face and for the first time so far, he felt cheated. All his kind feeling towards his old student suddenly dried up. He looked at Dr Srinivasan unemotionally just as he ordered his man to proceed towards the interrogation room and told him to wait outside until he came and collected the book himself. He hung up. His eyes were full of guilt, and his face an epitome of apology. With the same feeling, he said, ‘I have committed a mistake, but I never knew I was doing so. I am going to rectify it now. Before I leave, please know that I was not leading this team, someone else was, and it wasn’t before today that I knew I stood on the wrong side. All of them are innocent, these kids, they know nothing.’

Om closed his eyes, disappointed, and said, ‘What have you done? Whom are you all working for?’

‘I thought I was working for money, so I never tried to know the details of the work. All of them thought they were working for me and because they trusted my judgement, they asked nothing. I have to leave now, to safeguard the books from his filthy hands. I have committed an unpardonable mistake but please, try to forgive me if I fail in my quest,’ said Dr Srinivasan, his head bowed out of guilt and shame. Suddenly, he turned and went to the camera installed on one of the walls for the old man to see, and hit it many times till it broke into pieces. The old man watched Dr Srinivasan hitting the camera and then the screen went blank. The old man smiled.

Dr Srinivasan held Om’s hands, pressed them into his once, and turned to leave. Om asked, ‘Who paid you to do this?’

‘His name is Nagendra, that is all I know,’ came the answer as Dr Srinivasan left the room in a rush. Om’s face

turned pale upon hearing the name. He was as astounded as everyone else listening to his story of immortality.

As Dr Srinivasan left, Parimal started walking towards the exit. ‘Parimal?’ Dr Batra called after him.

‘Going for a smoke,’ said Parimal, without looking behind him.

Dr Batra and Shahista looked at each other, surprised, as this time Parimal did not stammer. While LSD kept herself engrossed in pressing the keys on her computer, she really looked as if she was in a hurry.

As Parimal got away from the sight of his teammates, he ran as fast as he could towards the kitchen, which was right behind the facility after three right turns from the door at the end of the corridors. He reached the kitchen, went to the common wall between the kitchen and the facility and stood there, waiting for something impatiently. He checked his watch every now and then. The old man still sat behind his desk, noticing every move of everyone.

Dr Batra and Dr Shahista stood in the middle of the room, stunned at the change in the atmosphere around them. They were witnessing Dr Srinivasan conversing with Om Shastri with a lot of gratitude and respect and in tears. His body language revealed that like LSD and Parimal, he too was in a hurry. Abhilash lay down in his chair, sleeping with his head on the desk.

LSD was totally engrossed in her computer and was typing a code which was tattooed on her left toe. ‘1 Corinthians 15:51’ read the code.

It meant victory over death.

As she pressed enter on the keyboard, the wall where Parimal was waiting transformed into a door. A few bricks fell off and a small screen with a touch keypad asked for a code. He typed in the same code, ‘1 Corinthians 15:51’. The

door opened. It was a narrow passage between the walls, only 3 feet wide and 16 feet long. A narrow, hidden room came into view. A room full of all kinds of weapons used for assassination, bulletproof armour and suits. This passage had white light and every weapon was displayed on the walls. It had another door opposite the first one. This door opened back into the interrogation room. Parimal started picking things up without wasting any time.

LSD was continuously eyeing everyone to find a solitary moment. She now had it. She rushed towards the washrooms at the corner of the interrogation room.

The masked man had brutally killed the guards in the corridor, without making any noise whatsoever. Then his partner entered the facility and openly shot everyone he saw dressed in a uniform. The gunshots echoed in the facility and deafened everyone inside it. As all the guards rushed to the entrance, the first partner’s path cleared up and saved him a lot of time in reaching the interrogation room.

Om heard the gunshots along with Shahista and Dr Batra. He was at once galvanized into action and requested them to free him, or there would be grave consequences which they would not live to see.

Abhilash didn’t react and kept slumbering. Dr Batra approached him and Shahista went to Om, fighting in her head the dilemma of right and wrong. Dr Batra tried to jolt Abhilash awake but he lay there senseless.

Dr Batra checked his pulse, only to find him dead. Shahista panicked and decided to untie Om. Parimal had killed Abhilash the moment he had seen the old man’s face on the computer. How and why were questions that nobody in the interrogation room had the answer to.

Dr Srinivasan reached the corridor of the chamber and told Veerbhadra to hand him the book. Veerbhadra, unaware of the gravity of the situation, handed the book to him. Dr Srinivasan hugged the book tight to his chest and started back towards the interrogation room. The old man saw it all. He picked up an earpiece and pressed a button.

‘Lizz . . .?’ he whispered in his throaty voice.

Inside the washroom, LSD listened intently from a similar earpiece and replied, ‘Yes, sir.’ She stood on a tap and pulled an unseen and inaccessible bag hidden in the loft of the washroom.

The Parimal who had gone inside the passage, and the one who came out of it, were two entirely different men, and yet were the same.

In the interrogation room, as Dr Batra and Shahista struggled to untie Om, LSD came out. Shahista and Dr Batra witnessed a severe transformation in her. They saw her walking towards them with a pair of automated P6 22 pistols.

The same pistols as the man who was now approaching the interrogation room had tied to his thighs.

This man’s partner, heavily loaded with ammunition, blasted the front entrance with a bazooka, with many casualties in a single shot. It was impossible for the guards to locate the man in the thick woods. The sun was going down with each passing moment.

In the facility, as Dr Srinivasan entered the interrogation room, he saw LSD and instantly knew that not all the members were as innocent as he had imagined. He was panting heavily as he stepped into the room. He tried to pretend that nothing had happened, but LSD had decided his fate. As Dr Srinivasan read LSD’s eyes, she smiled

sarcastically. All was quiet before LSD coldly shot Dr Srinivasan in the chest and snatched the book from him.

Dr Srinivasan fell on the floor and blood gushed out from his body. He died slowly, feeling all the pain he was meant to. Dr Batra and Shahista stood in utter shock, watching Dr Srinivasan breathing his last and LSD brutally watching him. Guilt was far from her. The old man back in the chamber smiled as he saw the book in LSD's hands. LSD aimed the gun at Dr Batra and Shahista together and warned, 'Don't! Or before you even realize that I have a knack of using both my hands simultaneously, your souls will have met their maker.'

Om witnessed everything in the process of being untied.

'You want to kill us? You will really shoot at us, huh?' Shahista said in a rather courageous tone. 'If need be,' came the blunt reply from LSD. 'What are you waiting for, then?' Shahista asked.

LSD smiled a shameless smile and said, 'My orders,' walking towards the only exit of the room and locking it from the inside.

After ending the lives of two more guards who stood right outside the doors of the interrogation room, in the way he liked, in peace and in quiet, the man parted with his mask and his glasses too. He had long white hair and a well-built body. He took off the armour from his chest to reveal large golden bracelets encircling both his wrists. He picked up his bow and arrow with his left hand and kicked the door of the interrogation room hard.

Parimal, loaded with ammunition, reached the old man's room and sat on the floor at his knees. The old man pampered him. While he pampered Parimal, the old man kept an eye on all the visuals on the screen. Suddenly, he saw someone killing the men at the door of the interrogation

room and trying to break it open. He pointed towards the screen in order to show it to Parimal.

At once, Parimal, who was sitting calmly, turned ferocious. He stood up in one fine movement and went for Om Shastri and LSD.

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Chapter 14
Deathless Warriors

The other partner had nearly cleared the front gate when only Veerbhadra and two of his men remained to be conquered. Dr Shahista showed some courage and started untying Om again.

Sensing that, the old man ordered LSD to kill both of them, and bring Om to him, alive.

LSD sarcastically smiled again, and then aimed at Dr Shahista and Dr Batra with both her hands, and shot simultaneously. Dr Batra could save himself because of his faster reflexes but the second bullet found its target. Only not the one for whom it was intended. Dr Shahista had her eyes on Om, Om on LSD, and LSD on Shahista. So Om had a moment to react before she shot Shahista. Om had replaced himself with Shahista unintentionally in a bid to save the selfless saviour. The bullet hit Om’s back. Both Shahista and Om fell to the ground at a distance from each other. LSD realized that she had committed a huge mistake by shooting at Om. Without thinking about it, she aimed at Shahista once again. Om lay on the floor watching helplessly, wincing in pain. After a moment, Dr Shahista was shot in the chest.

Parimal entered the passage room, passing through the kitchen to reach the interrogation room through the hidden

passage. On the other side, the main door to the interrogation room was too weak to bear another kick now. LSD held Om by his collar and dragged him towards a wall, looking around for Dr Batra at the same time. Out in the corridor, Veerbhadra fell back slowly, hitting the kitchen door as the man entered the building. Parimal entered the password to unlock the door to enter the interrogation room. A few bricks fell inside the interrogation room, where LSD waited for Parimal to arrive and Om Shastri bled heavily. The man went for the final kick just then and the door came apart. Everyone in the room stood stupefied as they comprehended the face that entered. The face was one of the images that had an imprint in Om's memory and thereby had appeared on the screen. He was the man Om had claimed to be searching for a thousand years. He was an epitome of the past standing abreast with the present, fully equipped to look time in its eyes.

He was Parashuram.

His face had on it the rage and fury of Lord Shiva. He had big eyes that hid nothing and strong hands capable of lifting a mountain.

From the other end, in walked the other partner, another person back from death: Ashwatthama, as they all knew him. Veerbhadra saw him and immediately knew that he had seen him in Om's memories of Ashwatthama and Subhash Chandra Bose. Veerbhadra, terrified, ran towards the chamber of the old man.

Parashuram saw Om, bleeding and a hostage in the hands of LSD, and his eyes burnt with rage. He lifted his bow to shoot at her, just when the bricks fell and the door opened. Behind LSD, Parimal walked in, ready to attack Parashuram. He rushed to get in front of LSD, took aim and shot at Parashuram before he could have shot LSD.

Parashuram missed the target as he defended himself. Meanwhile, LSD entered the passage room and dragged Om along with her. Om felt an immense pain and found it impossible to stand. Dr Batra saw it all as he hid behind a stainless steel operating table. Both Parashuram and Parimal shot at each other, but in the ambush, Parimal had managed to rescue LSD and Om. He ordered LSD to press the button that closed the door which could then not be opened from outside. LSD pushed the button and Parimal ran towards it to make it to the door. Parashuram knew that this was the last shot he could take at Parimal, so he lifted his *farsaa* (axe) and threw it at the door, screaming and wild with anger. The aim was perfect. The strength with which the weapon was thrown was enough to cut Parimal into two halves but before it could hit him, the doors slid close, catching the weapon in the slit of the opening.

Parashuram ran towards the door but knew that it was too late. Parimal crossed the hidden passage, followed by LSD, who still dragged Om. They reached the kitchen and kept walking towards the corridor to advance to the old man's chamber. They saw Veerbhadra coming towards the kitchen's corridor, heading to the same place where they intended to reach. Veerbhadra saw them too, rushing out of the kitchen, with all their arms and ammunition. He followed their gaze to see that Om bled and marked their trail with the blood gushing out of him. Veerbhadra stood stupefied at the scenario. Something inside him compelled him to take aim at Parimal, a gut instinct. He had learnt from experience that gut instincts are to be followed, always! So he grabbed his gun and aimed it at Parimal.

'What are you doing? Who the hell are you?' he thundered. His voice echoed in the glass corridor for some seconds before fading away.

Parimal replied to this by aiming his weapon towards Veerbhadra, too. LSD gestured to Parimal to put his gun down but Parimal refused. LSD then lowered his gun with her hand, slowly.

‘Veerbhadra, we are a part of your team. We are taking him to Nagendra sir. Please come along.’

‘How did he get injured and who is Nagendra?’ Veerbhadra asked, raising an eyebrow.

‘A man attacked us all inside the interrogation room, and tried to kill him. We somehow managed to save him. There is no time to explain the rest. We should first reach a safe spot before sorting things out between us. For now, just know that we are on the same team. Believe me,’ LSD replied, concealing her expressions.

Om heard every word LSD said, but he did not counter her. He was in too much pain to talk and also, he knew that on knowing the truth, Veerbhadra would attack them. Om also knew that Veerbhadra stood no chance of winning against these two skilled fighters. So he decided to remain silent for the moment.

Veerbhadra nodded at the theory served to him and accompanied them to the chamber. Veerbhadra now held Om and assisted him in walking. The time lost in talking to Veerbhadra had reduced the distance between them and Ashwatthama, who was now just a turn behind them. Parashuram, who had to cover the longer corridor, was on the run.

In the chamber, the old man looked at the screen for the last time to calculate how much time they would all take to bring Om there. Then he powered down the screen and decided they were three minutes down. He then moved the screen sideways to reveal a lock code pattern affixed to the

wall behind it. He pressed a few buttons on the keypad of the lock screen.

Suddenly, a few cracks surfaced on three of the walls, excluding the ones containing the entrance door and the exit door. He then pressed a few more keys and the cracks emerged as numerous doors on all sides, opening in different directions and into long dark passages. As the walls parted and the doors appeared, one of the marble tiles on the floor, 8 feet by 5 feet in size, descended below its level and moved horizontally under the adjacent tile to reveal a staircase that was hidden beneath the floor. The old man had safely wrapped the book in a blood-red cloth, which he now hid inside a bag, along with some medicines and a few other books. Now, he waited for Parimal and LSD to arrive, and hid the keypad behind the screen again.

Parimal and LSD had almost reached the door to the old man’s chamber, which was being guarded by two men. Veerbhadra was close behind as he had to carry Om’s weight added to his own, which slowed him down. However, there was nothing that slowed down Ashwatthama and Parashuram. Just when Parimal entered the code to open the door, Ashwatthama took the last turn and now could see them. The opponents stood at the two corners of the long corridor, barely 20 feet apart. Closest to Ashwatthama stood Veerbhadra.

Ashwatthama aimed at Veerbhadra, who held Om and started walking towards Parimal and LSD, cautiously. Veerbhadra, LSD and Parimal stood clueless, their backs towards Ashwatthama. But the security guards saw him, and began shooting ferociously at once. Veerbhadra, LSD and Parimal were alerted and realized how close the danger had been. Ashwatthama’s target had shifted to the guards now. As he shot one of them in the head, a bullet from

behind him cleared the other's chest. He turned around to find Parashuram lowering his weapon after the successful shot.

Meanwhile, Parimal and LSD entered the chamber and began a series of attacks on their foes, from the inside. Veerbhadra, under the impression that he fought for the righteous, laid Om down against the wall and bravely fought to save Om and other team members.

Back in the interrogation room, Dr Batra stood near Abhilash, who had been deceptively killed by Parimal, and then approached Dr Shahista. He cried bitterly at the loss he was witnessing.

His grievances faded as he realized that his own life was at stake, too. He was still alive, but he knew not till when. The gunshots in the distance broke his reverie. He had to devise a plan to escape from the building. He gathered evidence and samples of Om's blood, LSD's laptop and Om's file, which contained all the pictures and names he had been using, and sneaked out of the building.

Veerbhadra fought like a real soldier before being shot first by Parashuram in his shoulder and then by Ashwatthama in his chest and stomach. He fell into Om's lap, looked above at his face and apologized for failing to save him. Om's eyes filled with tears as Veerbhadra breathed his last in his arms.

LSD screamed from inside the chamber and banged her fists on the door that separated her from Om and Veerbhadra. She looked at Veerbhadra and desired to see him for the last time, but Parimal held her back, since he knew that the enemies weren't far away. Since Om was shot, with his blurred vision, he saw Nagendra with Parimal and LSD, and could partially recognize him. Parimal closed another door with a heavy heart. Ashwatthama rushed

towards Om to ensure he was fine and Parashuram rushed towards the closing door of the chamber.

‘Guruji, he is bleeding profusely!’ Ashwatthama exclaimed.

Parashuram was busy fixing detonators on the door and replied, ‘Tear his shirt and tie it to his wounds tightly. He can’t die, but he mustn’t faint either. Take him away from this door and stay with him all the time. I am going after them.’

‘As you order, Guruji.’

Ashwatthama took Om back to the kitchen and started searching for the first-aid kit while Om was laid on one of the working tables.

Om looked at Parashuram and the door, one after another, and then found himself at a loss for words.

He had so many questions, but was slowly losing consciousness.

‘I have been searching for you for yugas. I knew you were there,’ he managed to say.

‘You were always on our radar. We never lost track of you. You never found us because we didn’t want you to,’ Ashwatthama revealed.

‘How did you find me here?’

‘We tracked down a few men from your locker in one of the banks down here to Ross Island.’

Om was taken aback on hearing this. The truth then dawned upon him that people had been to the Sri Lankan caves while he was detained at this place. Upset, he asked, ‘Where are the books?’

Ashwatthama’s face grew grim.

‘They are with them, in their possession. Guruji has gone after them,’ Ashwatthama said in a disappointed tone.

‘Why have you come for me? Why are you saving me?’ Om asked.

‘Because . . . you hold the key to the end.’

Om, surprised, looked at him, and fought the heaviness that weighed on his mind. Gradually, he let his mind drift into the darkness and fell on the table in front of him.

Parashuram blasted the steel door and entered the old man’s chamber. He saw numerous doors then and faced the dilemma of which one to choose in order to follow his enemies.

As LSD and Parimal had entered the chamber, they, along with their boss, had hidden under the tile which opened up a staircase. The tile had been shut properly again. Now, as Parashuram looked around, he saw nothing out of the ordinary. He randomly chose a door and opened it. A long corridor unveiled itself. Parashuram started sprinting inside it. But to his dismay, he soon met a dead end at the other corner. He tried another one, but all in vain. Then, he gave up. The bombs he had affixed to different corners of the facility would blow any time now, of which Om and Ashwatthama were unaware. So he rushed back towards the kitchen. There, he found Ashwatthama removing the bullet from Om’s body.

LSD, Parimal and the old man hadn’t waited there at all. The passage was a secret one, skilfully built. It opened up to the seashore.

The three came out under the sky on to the sand. A submarine had already been waiting for them. They boarded it, and left the island with the books.

Parashuram, along with Ashwatthama, had just come out of the building when it blew. The facility, so artistically made, was reduced to nothing within a few minutes.

Their enemies too saw this phenomenon, though from a different corner of the island.

‘Where are the books?’ Ashwatthama asked.

‘They are with them,’ Parashuram replied.

‘And where are they?’

‘They have left the island.’

‘But they have the books. What will our next move be?’

‘Our next move is to protect Om. It’s time for him to know about his concealed existence. Now he must know the truth about who he was before Mrityunjay as he will be the one who will defend us the next time we face them.’

‘But how will we find them now? We have no clue where they might have gone!’ Ashwatthama grew more and more anxious.

‘They will come for us. We don’t have to go searching for them.’

‘Why will they come for us? They already have what they want.’

‘They will soon realize that we hold the final key to the lock of immortality,’ said Parashuram, looking in Om’s direction.

‘They will need a drip of Dhanvantari’s blood flowing in Om’s body to complete the procedure of immortality, for which they will have to come searching for us again.’

Hidden on another corner of the island, frightened to death, was Dr Batra, with the blood sample of Om that Parashuram thought only they had.

‘Guruji, what do we do now?’

‘We only wait,’ assured Parashuram.

Parashuram stood firm at the edge of the rock, taking in the beauty of the sun setting in the horizon.

Ashwatthama asked Om, ‘Do you have any idea who they were?’

‘Nagendra,’ Om replied.

‘How is it possible? Nagendra is long lost!’ exclaimed Ashwatthama.

Parashuram answered, standing with folded hands on the rock near the seashore, still looking at the setting sun. ‘Long lost . . . not dead. Just lost.’

Nagendra impatiently started reading the book, with eyes gleaming like that of a child’s at the sight of his favourite candy as Parimal drove the U-boat far from the island. LSD looked at nothing.

Far away, in the sky, the sun was setting, taking away with it the bright blue sky, leaving behind . . . darkness.

By dusk, Parshuram and Ashwatthama stood near the sea above the rocks, waiting for another wave to hit it, as the one that had just passed had failed to break it.

Year 2041

Mrs Batra spoke instantly as Prithvi stopped for a while to have a sip of water from his own water bottle, which he had in his bag.

‘How do you know all of this? Who are you? Why are you searching for Om Shastri?’

Prithvi quenched his thirst while hearing the new set of questions from Mrs Batra and replied calmly, looking into her eyes after putting his bottle back in his bag, ‘Because he is my father.’

TO BE CONTINUED …

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It is impossible for me to write an acknowledgment that doesn’t start with you both. Dad, you were, are and will always be my best friend. Maa, the writer in me is you.

Bulbul Goyal, you are so stubborn. You never gave up on me. You are so inflexible that you did not allow me to let go of the dream I once saw. I love you for being so stubborn and inflexible when it comes to my happiness. You are each and every letter of the word ‘success‘ in my life.

Avi, you don’t usually express yourself in words, whereas I am a writer. We make a perfect balance, my little (not-so-little) brother. You flew the family out of the worst windstorm, singing us melodies as if nothing had happened.

Anu and Avi, if someone wants to learn what sacrifice for the family means, they need to know you both. I am grateful and truly blessed to have you.

Aradhya, I have been waiting for you for six years . . . and I will wait for you till eternity. I know you will come back one day . . . someday.

I still remember my first meeting with them. There were no cameras around for them to put up pretenses, or the media to judge their behaviour.

Yet, they greeted me with genial and disarming smiles, and I couldn’t help but respond with one of mine, mesmerized by their charming and humble nature.

The remarkable lady appeared no different than a friendly next-door neighbour, dressed in a simple household suit. The exceptional man, cherished by millions, was in an ordinary olive green T-shirt and black track pants, with his

hands covered in grease. I would later discover that he had been busy fixing his bike.

For people like me, who are inspired by such great achievers, it may seem disappointing that at first glance these individuals seemed so unexceptional. However, reassured by the couple's unassuming and simple nature, I completely forgot the kind of company I was in within minutes. I was swept away by their magical ability to put anyone at ease. Seemingly unaffected by the attention and adoration they receive on a daily basis, the pair was as humble, modest and grounded as the people I meet in my day-to-day life.

I am talking about Padma Bhushan, Padma Shri, Honorary Lieutenant Colonel Mahendra Singh Dhoni, fondly known as Mahi. Complimenting his aura of grandeur with her cheerfulness and incorruptible innocence was Sakshi Dhoni, his better half in every sense of the term.

They were absolutely adorable together, and left me with memories I will always cherish.

Sakshi and Mahi, for your kindness, I owe you my unconditional loyalty till the end of my life.

Rishi Arora (baabaa), thank you for being the one that no one else wanted to be then. My friend, three cheers to you.

Mr Virendra Pratap Singh, I can write a book on you, but until I do, this is my tribute to you for your unsaid promise that you are always with me.

Can you imagine a lawyer not exploiting someone while pretending to help? I am blessed to have known not one but two such selfless lawyers who fought for me for four years and supported me financially instead of being paid for their services. Mrs Pooja Vijayvargiya and Mr Rahul Vijayvargiya, I'm in your debt for life for your selfless support.

True friends are families you can select. Rahul Agrawal, thank you for being just such a family, my friend.

The blessings you get fight the problems your life presents. Mrs Sapna Chitnis, I am blessed to have you as my second mom. Love you, ma’am.

Gods have their own unique ways of telling us that they exist. Mr Hatim Ali Malviya, I wonder if Allah and Ram had discussed us at a dinner table before we met.

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Sometimes, all you need to know is that there is a door you can knock on anytime, a door behind which there is someone who will take you under their wing. Mr Robin Bhatt, that’s your door for me. Thank you for believing in me then.

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Symbols

What appears to be the tiniest can be the mightiest piece.

Satya Yuga

Dwapara Yuga

Treta Yuga

Kali Yuga

The unending cosmic loop of yugas starting with Satya Yuga, moving through Treta and Dwapara Yuga and ending with Kali Yuga only to start back again from Satya Yuga.

A mysterious search across Incredible India!

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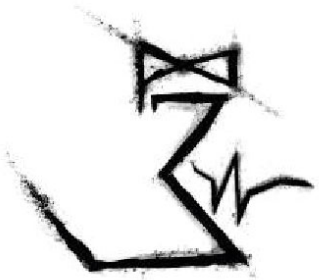
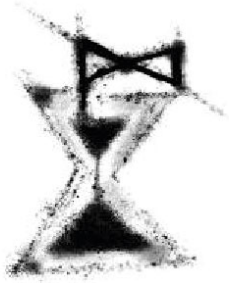
Ashwathama

Parashurama

2 out of the 7 immortals found. Where are the others (Veda Vyasa, Hanuman, King Mahabali, Kripacharya and Vibhishana)?



Om's timeless journey through all yugas continues.



Can time run out for the immortals too?

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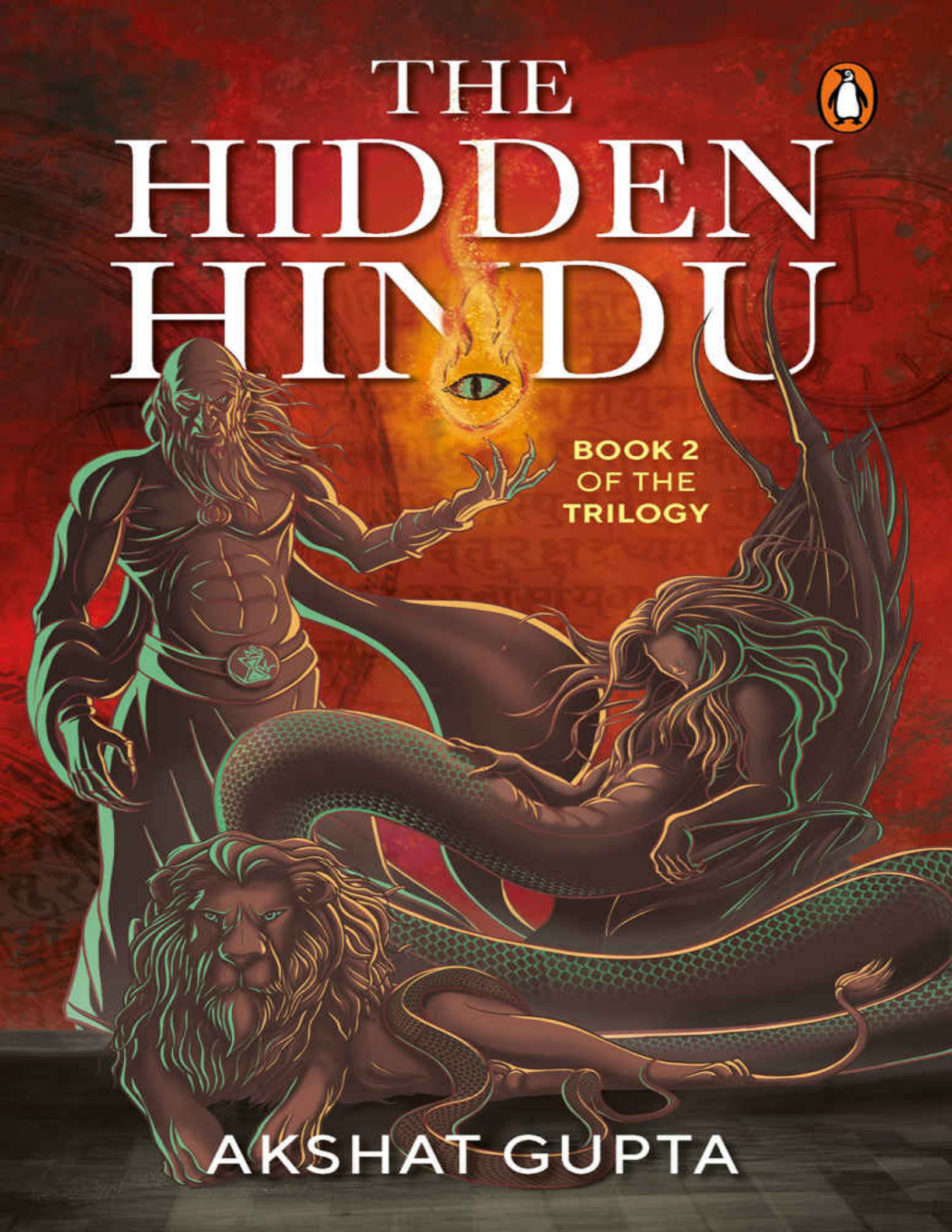
THE HIDDEN HINDU



BOOK 2
OF THE
TRILOGY

AKSHAT GUPTA

AKSHAT GUPTA

THE HIDDEN HINDU 2

Book 2 of the Trilogy

PENGUIN BOOKS

Contents

1. Land of the Extinct
2. Legends of the Past
3. Nanshaad
4. One Word and Two Lakes
5. The Scion of Serpents
6. Nine
7. The Curse and the Cure
8. Lost and Found
9. The Fourth Immortal
10. The Shadow Figure
11. Boy with the Black Birthmark
12. An Unceremonious Cremation
13. Devdhwaja
14. The Old Man’s Pet

Footnotes

3. Nanshaad
5. The Scion of Serpents
9. The Fourth Immortal
11. Boy with the Black Birthmark
12. An Unceremonious Cremation

Symbols

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THE HIDDEN HINDU 2

Akshat Gupta belongs to a family of hoteliers and is now an established Bollywood screenwriter, poet and lyricist. He is a bilingual author and has been working on The Hidden Hindu trilogy for years. He was born in Chhattisgarh, grew up in Madhya Pradesh and now lives in Mumbai. You can connect with him on Instagram at **authorakshatgupta** or send him an email on **akshat.gupta0204@gmail.com**.

Chapter 1
Land of the Extinct

Prithvi had been narrating the chronicles of Ross Island for quite some time. The kidnapping of Om for interrogation about the books of Mrit Sanjeevani, the uncovering of Om's past, the resurfacing of Ashwatthama and Parashurama, their rivalry with Nagendra, and the reality of Parimal and LSD, Nagendra's lieutenants, who had been hiding in the guises of an Indian history professor and a hacker, were already swarming Mrs Batra's head. While she struggled to absorb it all, Prithvi's new revelation raised more questions than it answered. Startled by Prithvi's claim that he was Om's son, Mrs Batra sat up in alarm and said, 'Om Shastri is *your father*?'

'Okay, I need a break,' she added distractedly. 'Do you want anything? You know what, I'll just heat up some soup quickly.'

'That would be great, thank you,' Prithvi smiled.

While Mrs Batra went about her tasks in the kitchen, Prithvi absorbed the surroundings. Her house was noticeably compact. The living room contained simple furniture, with the glass windows overlooking a small garden and veranda. There were two bedroom doors and another door leading to a descending staircase. Behind him was a wall exhibiting Mr Batra's achievements in the field of medicine. The framed photographs hinted that the couple had no children, that it was just the two of them. Prithvi's observations came to a halt when Mrs Batra entered with two bowls of steaming soup in her hands and a question on her mind.

'So, where were you after all of this unravelled at Ross Island?'

Prithvi thought for a moment as he blew on the steam and took a sip. 'It's a little complicated. I was 21,780 feet above and 25,938 feet below sea level, both at the same time. Where would you like to go first—above the mountains or beneath the ocean?'

Grimacing at the riddle, Mrs Batra said, 'Let's just start from the top.'

At 21,780 feet above sea level, Om was lying unconscious at an unfamiliar location. His senses were still tuning in when he heard a distant yell.

‘Hurry up! Ask him to come immediately.’

As if waking from a dream of the past, Om opened his eyes slowly. Encircling him were a few old men who were smiling down at him blissfully, none of whom he recognized, yet he felt oddly safe under their gaze. He got up gingerly and sat up straight on the thin jute mat under him. The mud-walled hut was freezing cold. The men around him were covered in brown woollen robes. Everyone was wearing the same clothes, and Om realized so was he. This must be a monastery, he assessed.

When he looked around, he was confronted with his own reflection in a mirror propped up in the corner. He did not see the usual matted dreadlocks on his head or the uneven, ruffled moustache and beard on his face. Instead, he saw trimmed hair and a shaved face that drew more attention to his features: the bare cheeks and lipline, the forehead, the eyes—he had been given a complete makeover.

Om peeked outside the small window with wooden grills and saw tiny snowflakes falling softly and mingling with the bright white blanket that covered the land as far as he could see. Suddenly, a wave of déjà vu washed over him. Waking up in a hut, being greeted by unknown faces, the snowfall outside—everything added up to remind him of the time he had first met Dhanvantari and Sushruta . . . Om’s first memory. Although that was aeons ago, one thing still remained unchanged—he still had no idea about his identity before he became Mrityunjay.

He stood up, removing the blanket, and questioned the old men around him while walking towards the door. ‘Where am I? Who is it that has been called for me?’ While questioning the strangers, he wondered who they were, but before he could speculate in his head, his thoughts were interrupted by a strong, booming voice, a voice that had become familiar to Om only recently.

‘They called me,’ the voice, belonging to one of the mightiest combatants of all eras, answered. Ashwatthama, the cursed immortal, followed. Om had met him before losing consciousness on Ross Island, where Ashwatthama had been in advanced battle gear. Here, he was dressed simply in the same robes as Om and everyone else. Here, there were no differences; every soul was equal, and an unspoken sense of peace and mutual respect prevailed. All the old men bowed their heads in respect as Ashwatthama walked past them. He reciprocated in the same manner. He gradually closed in to see Om’s bullet wound, but it was not to be found. The injury had miraculously

healed without leaving any discernible scar. Ashwatthama seemed to have been expecting it and looked back up at Om's face, but Om already had other questions.

'This place seems familiar . . . Where am I?'

Ashwatthama smiled. 'Yes, you have been here before. As the guardian of Mrit Sanjeevani, you had wandered in the Himalayas for nearly nine years after your reawakening. This is very close to your first home, the residence of Dhanvantari and Sushruta, the place you were resurrected.'

Om was shaken to his core when he heard Ashwatthama utter those words. Deep down, he had yearned for this answer, but he still had not braced himself for it. At last, the place that always evaded him had been found, putting his search over all those centuries to rest. His mind raced with a thousand questions, and he did not know how to react. Om gathered himself and finally spoke up.

'So, we are in the Himalayan range! I could never find this place. Which mountain is this?'

Ashwatthama answered with a recitation of reverence.

'परम रम्य गिरिवर कैलासू,

सदा जहाँ शिव उमा निवासू।।'

Om grasped that the Awadhi verse was hinting towards the pious mountain he was standing on. He joined his hands, looked up in awe and said, 'Mount Kailash! The abode of Lord Shiva, the centre of the universe, the navel of the realm, the pillar of the world, the Swastika Mountain, the "Precious Jewel of Snow" in Tibetan; all these names belong to one of the most enigmatic and holy mountains in the world—Kailash Parbat.'

'Yes, Kailash Parbat,' nodded Ashwatthama.

Hoping to gain more clarity, Om continued. 'I have come to Kailash before but have never found my home.'

'I know,' Ashwatthama said confidently, which brought Om to his next question, 'Why couldn't I?'

'So far, no one has been successful in climbing the revered Mount Kailash and neither will they ever. Numerous expeditions have failed to reach its summit; the mountain mysteriously changes the direction of its tracks for those who want to climb it. It is believed to be the axis mundi, literally, the "axis" of the world, which provides a connection between earth, heaven and hell, between the physical and the spiritual worlds—'

Om chimed in, ‘Yes, I know that the abode of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati in the majestic Mount Kailash has been a point of fascination for pilgrims for millennia. This is the celestial centre of the world, where heaven intersects the earth, and is considered holy by Hindus, Buddhists and Jains. These fascinating ranges are also home to 500 souls, as some saints believe, and only when a resident soul wishes for moksha (salvation), can another soul dwell here.’

‘Yes, and some of those sacred souls are standing with you right now,’ replied Ashwatthama, affirming what Om thought was just a myth.

Om took another long look at the cluster of ascetics and noticed the calm smiles adorning their faces.

‘These widely believed fables are all actually true. This place is Gyanganj, the city of the extinct,’ Ashwatthama confirmed.

Om’s thoughts were flying a mile a minute. It was impossible for him to stay composed, and he interrupted Ashwatthama yet again.

‘Gyanganj is often revered as a legendary prehistoric Indian and Tibetan city, a kingdom of enigmatic eternal beings, well-concealed from the world. Despite existing in the deeper crevices of the Himalayas, it has an influence over mankind in several stealthy ways. This is the place where sages formulate the evolution of not only the human race but of all conscious beings.’

‘It is often addressed with various names like Shangri-La and Siddhashram. This is the holy realm that drafts the destiny of all. No one can access Gyanganj unless they have a karmic connection with it,’ Ashwatthama added.

Om was not done yet; he was bursting with unanswered queries. ‘Is it true that there is no death here and the consciousness always remains alive?’

Ashwatthama uttered the exact words Om had been waiting to hear his entire life. ‘As I said, all myths that you have ever heard about this place are true. Om, you are finally amid the clan you were searching for.’

‘But why couldn’t I find it all these years?’

Ashwatthama guided Om out of the cottage as he began explaining the elusive nature of Gyanganj.

‘Our city is embedded with a spiritual camouflage and exists in a completely different plane of reality, a dimension of manifestation, which is

why it has managed to stay hidden from modern mapping techniques, various technologies and satellites.'

Catching up with Ashwatthama, Om let the mystical place engulf him as he experienced a divine and powerful silence. Passing the southern edge of the mountain, he happened to look down from the cliff and couldn't help but stop at the mesmerizing sight before him. Ashwatthama glanced back to find Om standing transfixed and followed his gaze.

'That's Lake Mansarovar. It was first conceived in the mind of Brahma, after which it manifested here on earth,' Ashwatthama explained as Om's eyes took in the ethereal beauty; his face lit up with awe as sunlight bounced off the surface of the water, giving the lake a holy glow. The water was mostly tranquil, but still held a hint of chaos with tiny ripples embellishing its serenity. The deep blue sitting in the middle of those snow-capped peaks was one of the best scenes Brahma had painted for earth.

'It's . . . beautiful,' Om managed to muster something despite the indescribable scene overwhelming his senses.

'Come, we have another place to be,' Ashwatthama pulled Om out of his reverie.

After a short walk, they came upon the entrance of a cave. The opening led them into a tunnel which they could easily navigate because of the presence of a bright natural glow. Om was a little baffled to see this light because the top of the tunnel was sealed, and the source was untraceable. The tunnel continued to expand as they walked further. On the other side, there was a grand opening. When they stepped out, it was dusk. Om turned around to see that the tunnel's interior was still brightly lit. Maybe these are two different time zones, he speculated.

Om turned again towards Ashwatthama and found him on his knees, praying, his head bowed and hands joined in front of a flat rock platform. The platform was covered entirely with tiger skin that still had a ferocious feline head attached to it. Beside it hovered a transcendental, brilliantly carved, enormous trident, defying the laws of gravity. A 40-feet-long snake guarded the majestic trident. The whole set-up was no different from the depictions of Lord Shiva meditating in popular portraits. Om always supposed that these ideas must have been fragments of the imagination of Lord Shiva's devotees, but he was wrong. They were all authentic. Now that he stood there, he could observe that the illustrations he had admired throughout the yugas were actually exact depictions of Shiva's home; the

only difference between those portraits and reality now was the absence of Lord Shiva himself.

Om waited for Ashwatthama to finish his obeisance before he could confirm if this place was truly the one he was compelled to believe it was. It seemed so surreal to find himself in the lap of forces mightier than him—the forces of creation, destruction and transformation, which jointly sustained the universe. He could feel the sublime beauty pass through him in waves, charging the very fabric of his being, and subsequently the whole of Gyanganj.

Om was snapped out of this trance by a peculiar sound. He turned around to find that it came from a flightless bird that fluttered its brownish-grey plumage, tapped its yellow feet, and had a tuft of tail feathers, a grey, naked head, and a black beak. The bird was about one metre tall, and judging from its gait, Om could deduce that it weighed approximately 15 kg. It seemed to be the bird whose last confirmed sighting on earth was in the year 1662.

'Dodo!' he let out a loud whisper.

The bird immediately noticed the unfamiliar man staring at it and waddled further into the shrubs. Om found Ashwatthama still on his knees with his eyes closed, so he decided to take a closer look at the bird, which had disappeared centuries ago and was declared extinct.

Having encountered numerous beasts and birds during his prolonged lifetime, Om had become adept at identifying and responding to other creatures around him. He tiptoed in the direction of the bird and stood near the bushes it had disappeared into. There, he discovered another large and flightless bird about two and a half feet tall. It trotted about with its black back and a white belly, looking almost weighed down by a heavy black beak with grooves on its surface. A white band stretching between the eyes almost made the avian appear blind, but a keener look showed the glimmering beads of tiny black eyes. The wings appeared only around 15 cm long, rendering the bird flightless. It was another extinct species of bird, sighted last in 1852, called the great auk. Great auks were gifted swimmers, which made them impeccable hunters underwater. Like the dodo, it, too, sensed Om's scrutinizing gaze and sauntered away.

Spotting two extinct species in a matter of minutes added to Om's increasing astonishment and so he let his curiosity drive him to tail the bird. When the great auk dove down a cliff, Om came to an abrupt halt at the unexpected land's end. At the edge, a lake appeared out of nowhere. He

took cautious steps towards it. The lake looked like a perfectly flat disc of metal. It was exceptionally serene due to the shimmering vacant space around it. The placid spectacle took Om's breath away. The heaven-leaking light added a golden tint to the face of the lake. Om felt heaven on earth, though he was not sure if he was still on earth or not. Maybe it was true. *Maybe Kailash Parbat was indeed the only connection between the physical and spiritual worlds*. Om was startled at his own epiphany. He had never experienced such potent tranquillity and beauty before. He closed his eyes to let the stillness of the surroundings settle on him, but at that exact second, something disrupted the restful water, making him snap his eyes open. The movement was relatively close to him. The metal disc appeared to be melting when a gigantic creature, more than 40 feet long, that seemed to weigh tons, surfaced from the water. It was Steller's sea cow, another extinct herbivorous mammal. The last recorded Steller's sea cow had been sighted at the end of the seventeenth century!

Before Om could register the odd sightings of fauna that had disappeared from the rest of the world, he noticed that the sea cow was casually accompanied by a group of 20-feet-long baiji white dolphins, also known as the Chinese river dolphins, lapping towards the shore. As per Om's knowledge, these creatures had been officially declared extinct in 2002. As his eyes followed the dolphins near the shore, he spotted a towering Cry violet plant, with thick, light green leaves and light violet flowers. This beautiful species had last been sighted in the fifties. Om was again engrossed in the scene, but the silence didn't last long.

Suddenly, dry leaves crunched behind him, and Om turned towards the sound, which was coming from some distant shrubs. The shrubs were Coffea lemblinii, tall with white blossoms and a peeling, papery bark. They were last seen in 1907. He walked a few steps towards the bushes, expecting the dodo or the great auk to be behind them, but he held his steps in a heartbeat once he realized that what he beheld was no flightless bird, but a carnivorous creature which was almost twice the size of a lion and lived 11,700 years ago. It was the splendid savage, the sabre-toothed tiger. Om realized he had become a prey to the beast that could easily tear apart, and there was little distance between them. The predator could already smell his fear and hear his heart pounding due to the adrenaline coursing through him; all that was left for the beast to do was to pounce and devour. It was now time for the anticipated attack. Om knew this was an

inescapable ground he was standing on; how could he possibly outrun this naturally skilled beast in this vast terrain? He was stumped. His legs felt glued to the earth. That's when the beast did what it knew best—attack. The distance between them diminished in no time as it rushed towards Om with its heavy and bulky paws, releasing sharp nails and an open maw. The roar that rumbled from the beast, the loudest Om had heard in ages, travelled down Om's spine, leaving a trail of goosebumps behind. It was now a matter of seconds before Om would experience excruciating pain that would be enough to kill a mortal. The beast took its final step before leaping on its prey. Om's survival instincts loosened the grip of his feet on the earth and he knew he had to defend himself no matter what.

The two collided in wild fury; the sabretooth dominating Om with swipes and lashes and Om using all the combat skills learnt over the ages to get out of the fight alive. He knew that he wouldn't last long but just then, an apish entity, taller than an average human, came like thunder from the skies between the predator and the prey. The sabretooth collided with the new entrant, and the impact threw both the beast and the apish man a little distance from each other on the ground. The new fighter was apparently guarding Om, the way he bounced back on his feet before the sabretooth did. What Om witnessed next was a little hard to believe even for a man like him. The beast started falling back as the apish man advanced towards it. He walked very much like a human and despite his ape-like features, he held himself admirably, without any awkward movements. Because of him, the beast went back into the bushes and Om was safe. The saviour turned towards Om, who could now take a better look at his features. He was a monkey-headed human being with a monkey fur tail. He closely resembled Lord Hanuman, but it wasn't him. Om could tell the difference because he had met Lord Hanuman in the Ramayana era as Sushen, who had suggested Sanjeevani *buti* to save Laxman's life.

'Here you are!' exclaimed the heavy voice of the cursed immortal, bringing Om out of the bizarre experience of the hidden city inside the world-famous Mount Kailash. Om turned around and found Ashwatthama smiling, looking at the monkey man. The monkey man approached Ashwatthama and greeted him by bowing low with his hands joined in respect.

'These are all officially declared extinct!' Om blurted out in wonder.

‘Yes! That is why they are preserved here, every last one of them.’ Ashwatthama picked up a stray twig from the ground. ‘Our timeline starts from Satya yuga, here,’ he explained as he made a small inscription on a muddy patch. ‘Then comes Treta yuga,’ he drew a diagonal line from left to right, ‘which is followed by Dwapara yuga.’ He dragged the end of that diagonal upwards, drawing a straight line without lifting the twig. ‘And then Kali yuga.’ From there, he drew another diagonal from right to left. ‘Once this Kali yuga ends, all this flora and fauna will restart the next Satya yuga.’ He drew a final straight line, connecting it to the starting point. ‘And so the cycle continues repeating itself.’ As he said this, he ran the stick through the diagram repeatedly, making the strokes deeper. It was an infinity symbol.

Om looked all around him and found more such wiped-out species—a small bush of Acalypha wilderi, declared extinct in 2014, beside a Sigillaria tree growing tall, which had existed 383 million years ago. A West African black rhinoceros, weighing 1.5–2 tons and bearing two horns, last seen in Cameroon in 2006 and declared officially extinct in 2011. The Pyrenean ibex, that fed mainly on grasses and herbs, the last of its kind killed in 2000. Om found himself standing amid the most flourishing natural habitat, surrounded by every extinct animal and bird that had once inhabited this earth.

Ashwatthama started heading back to where Om had entered the habitation. While Om and the ape man followed him, Ashwatthama spoke to Om.

‘Om, this is Vrishkapi. He is the last of his clan, called Kimpurusha or Kapi.’

‘Kapi!’ repeated Om.

As if on cue, the huge monkey man roared,

> ‘जय हनुमान ज्ञान गुन सागर।
> जय कपीस तिहुं लोक उजागर।।’

The ape man spoke in a voice heavier than a man’s bass. He continued, ‘I am the last of the Kapi species mentioned in the first lines of the Hanuman Chalisa and—’

‘And also the guardian of this territory of our city,’ completed Ashwatthama, with a smile reciprocated by the Kapi.

‘Thank you for protecting me, Vrishkapi. I wasn’t sure if I would make it,’ Om said humbly.

‘That was just my Cutie. He likes hunting. I just conveyed to him that you’re off limits,’ said Vrishkapi with an innocent smile.

‘You call that giant Cutie?’ Om raised his brows, tickled by the nickname.

‘Vrishkapi is very creative with names,’ explained Ashwatthama with a chuckle.

‘And who are you? What are you doing here?’ Kapi turned to Om.

‘I . . . I am . . . trying to figure that out,’ stuttered a confused Om.

When Ashwatthama stepped into the tunnel, he walked out of the dusky sky into ample sunshine in a mere step. For a moment, it seemed there really were different time zones—hardly a few metres of distance had managed to create a stark difference in time perception. It appeared as if there was a transparent wall between Om and Ashwatthama, which was demarcating the territories of sun and moon, day and night, reality and dream. Vrishkapi stood at the invisible boundary and waved goodbye to both of them. He noticed a movement on his right side and shouted at the dodo, ‘Tara! I have told you several times not to walk on this side.’

In no time, Ashwatthama and Om were back at the vacant stone platform. Om took this opportunity to ask another question.

‘You mentioned my first home, the abode of Dhanvantari. How did you know that I lived here in the Himalayas?’

‘We didn’t know about your existence till we met him who knew everything about you.’

Om stood clueless as he did not know whom Ashwatthama was referring to. Noticing the anxiety on his face, Ashwatthama asked, ‘Would you like to meet him?’

At 21,780 feet above sea level, Om was not the only curious man in search of answers. There were questions being raised at a distance of approximately 2772 km from Kailash Parbat, 25,938 feet below sea level too. Nagendra glared at both the books of Mrit Sanjeevani open on his lap. He had achieved what he wanted, the secret to immortality, but he still lacked one crucial element—a sample of Om’s blood. Without that, his plans were in vain. He slapped the books shut in a loud thud. Behind him, Parimal and LSD flinched as they watched the enraged Nagendra scowl, and wondered what he had in mind next.

Chapter 2

Legends of the Past

At 10°N 90°E, around 560 km from Indira Point (the southernmost part of India's territory), a humongous submarine manoeuvred its way through the depths of the ocean. The submarine was almost two football fields long and as wide as a three-lane highway. Two steam turbines producing 50,000 horsepower and four 3200 kW turbo generators provided a sailing speed of 41.1144 kmph on the surface and 53.708 kmph underwater. This intimidating vessel was maintained and run by a crew of about 100, who worked in shifts.

In the common lobby of the submarine, Nagendra was busy plotting a new plan with Parimal and LSD.

'Set course for the shore closest to Kailash Parbat,' Nagendra ordered composedly. He stood up and briskly started walking towards his chamber, indicating that their short meeting was over. Parimal and LSD followed and made their way to the command centre. They would have to determine the shortest route to Digha beach from their present location while evading the Indian Navy.

The spontaneous change of route caused a stir of anxiousness within Parimal, which became evident as he spoke. 'Climbing Mount Kailash is forbidden. According to legends and writings, no mortal can summit Mount Kailash, where, among the clouds, is the abode of the gods. He who dares to start the journey towards the top of the mountain and see the faces of the gods will plummet to death! It is said that the only person to have ever been atop the sacred mountain was Milarepa, and—'

'Do not speak of that scoundrel in front of me ever again!' Nagendra's thundering objection to the mention of Milarepa interrupted the rant. Parimal shivered in fear and so did LSD.

Nagendra halted abruptly in the lobby before a watertight door made of heavy metal and secured with a sturdy lock. A white signboard spelling 'Restricted' in bold red made it clear that no other person on the ship was allowed to access the door. The upper part of the door had some mystical

symbols and letters engraved on it, as if derived from an ancient language. As Nagendra's arm moved closer to open it, LSD and Parimal shared a look before taking a deep breath, bracing themselves for what was coming. An extraordinary and dominant force field radiated from the restricted chamber and the space around them warped as the door was unbolted. An invisible energy entwined them like the roots of an old tree. Their shoulders felt the weight of the entire ocean on them and a waterfall of tears rolled down their cheeks. The network of blood vessels became etched on the interiors of their skin, appearing thick and webby on the exterior, as if they could burst at any moment, while blood poured out of their nostrils and ears. They stood stunned, with their eyes wide open, like souls trapped in statues, and could feel their hearts hammering against their ribcages. The blood flow in their veins outran the speed of the submarine.

Right before closing the door, Nagendra's brows furrowed as he raised his voice, 'I said take me to the closest shore to Kailash Parbat, not *to* Kailash Parbat.'

The door was finally shut, and the spell was broken. Parimal and LSD stood there disoriented while the door was bolted from the inside. LSD was sweating profusely. She wiped her face with her shaking palm and turned towards Parimal, who had trails of blood going down from his nose and ears, and drops falling on his shirt. LSD frantically took a big tuft of cotton and helped him wipe the blood off. Parimal held another piece of cloth to his nose to stop the bleeding.

After making sure that Parimal was stable, LSD broke the silence. 'So, tell me more about Mount Kailash.'

Parimal still held the cloth, which was now partially soaked in crimson, to his nose and continued to narrate in a hushed voice, 'Mount Kailash is known as axis mundi, or the axis of the earth suspended between the celestial poles. The ecosystem naturally regulates itself to create a habitable environment for all living beings. Pilgrims and others who visit the area around the mountain have reported a rapid growth of hair and nails within a span of twelve hours, growth which would usually take two weeks under normal conditions. Even while in the mountain's vicinity, time travels faster; something which is not witnessed anywhere else in the world. The mountain has air that causes accelerated ageing.'

The nosebleed subsided and Parimal discarded the cloth carelessly before opening his laptop. He continued to speak, 'Another profound mystery of

Mount Kailash is its geographical position with respect to the earth's poles and other ancient monuments. It cannot be a coincidence that the distance from Mount Kailash to the North Pole is 6666 km, and 13,332 km to the South Pole, which is exactly twice the distance to the North Pole, for some inexplicable reason. Mysteriously, the distance between the Egyptian pyramids and the North Pole is also 6666 km.'

Parimal flipped his laptop towards LSD. 'Look at this.'

LSD was astounded to read what was on the screen.

> Kailash Parbat to North Pole: 6666 km
> Kailash Parbat to Stonehenge: 6666 km
> Stonehenge to Devils Tower: 6666 km
> Stonehenge to Bermuda Triangle: 6666 km
> Bermuda Triangle to Easter Island: 6666 km
> Easter Island to Tazumal: 6666 km

As LSD stared at the numbers in disbelief, Parimal continued to chant everything he knew about the cryptic mountain, 'The highest peak of the world, Mount Everest, is 29,029 feet high and yet its summit has been scaled by more than 4000 people. Mount Kailash is almost 21,780 feet high, which is 7251 feet less than Mount Everest, yet numerous expeditions have failed at climbing the mountain. Even with several extensive studies and theories, it is believed that no one could comprehend the true reason why Mount Kailash cannot be ascended, why many attempted and failed despite it being a fairly scalable height for proficient mountaineers. I guess some mysteries are better left unsolved, no matter how intimidating they seem or how elaborate their history has been. There are legends about a Tibetan named Milarepa being the only human being who scaled the peak of Mount Kailash over 900 years ago.'

The submarine progressed towards 21.42°N 87.30°E, coordinates for Digha beach in West Bengal, the coast closest to Kailash Parbat. Parimal, being a historian by nature, also set sail to a narrative dating back almost a millennium in time.

'The life of Milarepa is one of Tibet's most treasured legends. Preserved orally for centuries, we cannot know how much of the story is factually true. Even so, through the ages, Milarepa's life instances have continued to teach and inspire incalculable numbers of Buddhists. This chronicle of

Tibet's greatest mystic is a saga of greed, vengeance, demons, magic, murder and restoration.

'Milarepa was born in 1052 AD in the village of Kya Ngatsa, a province of western Tibet. He was named Mila Thopaga, which means "a joy to hear". His family was a prosperous one and his family name, Josay, indicated noble descent from the Eagle clan. Thopaga and his little sister were cherished by the villagers. Eventually, his father grew very ill and realized he was dying. Calling his extended family to his deathbed, Thopaga's father directed that his estate be cared for by his brother and sister until Milarepa came of age and got married. But as soon as he died, Milarepa's aunt and uncle betrayed their brother's trust without a second thought. They divided the property between themselves and disowned Thopaga along with his mother and sister.

'Now outcasts, the little family lived in servant quarters. They were given meagre food and clothing and were made to labour in the fields. The children were malnourished, ragged and covered with lice. Those who once showered them with affection were now demeaning them with pleasure.

'When Thopaga turned fifteen, his mother tried to reclaim his inheritance. With great effort, she scraped together every last bit of her paltry resources to prepare a feast for her extended family and former friends. When the guests had eaten, she stood up to speak. Holding her head high, she recalled exactly what her husband had said on his deathbed, and she demanded that Thopaga be given the inheritance his father had intended for him. But the covetous aunt and uncle blatantly lied that the estate actually never belonged to them, and so Thopaga had nothing to claim. They forced the mother and children out of the servant quarters and into the streets. The family resorted to begging and odd jobs to stay alive.

'The mother had shot for the stars for her Thopaga and lost even the broken roof protecting them. Now she seethed with hatred for her husband's family and urged her son to study sorcery. "I will kill myself before your eyes," she told him, "if you do not attain vengeance."

'Compelled by his mother's vengeful entreaty, Thopaga found a sorcerer, a just man who had mastered the black arts, and became his apprentice. Initially, the sorcerer taught him only ineffectual charms, but once he learnt about and verified the injustice done to Thopaga, he diligently passed over to him all his knowledge of secret powerful spells and rituals.

‘Thopaga spent a fortnight in an underground cell, practising his lessons in dark magic. When his brief hibernation ended, he learnt that a house had collapsed on his extended family while they were gathered at a wedding. The rubble crushed everyone to death except the greedy pair. Thopaga deemed it fair that they survived the disaster, as it now gave him a chance to make them confront the ultimate consequence written by their own avarice.

‘His mother gave him the perfect plan. She wrote to her son and demanded that he destroy their crops as well. Thopaga hid in the mountains overlooking his hometown and summoned monstrous hailstorms to demolish the barley crops.

‘The villagers suspected black magic and angrily stormed into the mountains to find the perpetrator. Still in hiding, Thopaga overheard them talking about the ruined crops. He realized then that he had harmed innocent people in the heat of revenge. Burning with guilt, he repented his actions, travelled in search of another teacher and eventually, his intuition led him to India.

‘No one knows what he did in India and whom he exactly met during those years. It is said that his skin had turned green from consuming only nettle soup. His austerity—dressing in a white cotton robe, irrespective of how harsh or gentle the weather would be—earned him the name Milarepa, which means “Mila the cotton-clad”.’

LSD couldn’t wait to tie the story together. ‘If the summit of Kailash Parbat is unattainable, how did he achieve the impossible?’

‘I don’t know, but it is believed that no one can access Kailash Parbat unless they have a karmic connection with it. Milarepa lamented his wicked past later in life.

‘According to the legend, this is what he had said, “In my youth, I committed black deeds. In maturity, I practised innocence. Now, released from both good and evil, I have destroyed the root of karmic action and shall have no reason for action in the future. To say more than this would only cause weeping and laughter. What good would it do to tell? I am an old man. I want to be in peace.”’

‘Maybe the secret behind summitting Mount Kailash has something to do with these words,’ suggested LSD.

‘Yes, maybe . . . but what does Nagendra have to do with Milarepa?’ mumbled Parimal.

‘What? Did you say something?’ LSD asked, looking confused.

‘No! I wasn’t asking you. Anyway, as the tale goes, he died in 1135,’ Parimal sighed.

Confined inside a submarine, Parimal’s question about the relationship between Milarepa and Nagendra was unanswered, but back in Gyanganj, Om was about to decipher how Ashwatthama and Parashurama learnt of his existence. Ashwatthama took Om back to the hut he had woken up in. There stood a saint who had green skin and was clad in a white cotton robe.

‘Meet Milarepa,’ Ashwatthama gestured towards the man, introducing him to Om.

Milarepa, the man who had died in 1135, according to historians, was actually hale and hearty in the land of the extinct!

At this point, Om was ready to hear all about his forgotten identity before he had met Nagendra in the hut of the great Dhanvantari. Under water, Nagendra sat in his restricted chamber, anticipating the submarine’s arrival on Digha beach.

As Prithvi paused and took his last sip from the bowl, Mrs Batra noticed the cold bowl of soup sitting full in her hands. Placing it aside, she asserted, ‘There was a third place between the mountain peaks and the ocean bed where crucial discoveries were being made. Dr Tej Batra, my husband, had noticed something extremely unusual while examining Om’s blood sample, which he managed to sneak out when the facility on Ross Island was destroyed. Unlike ordinary blood, which has red and white blood cells, Om’s sample contained unique black blood cells speckled throughout his blood. Tej decided to put them through various tests in order to explore the strange discovery. According to his hypothesis on Ross Island, just like the doubling of lifespan in yeast and mice, Om’s genes might be altering themselves to counter ageing. As predicted, the black blood cells in the sample mutated and cleared the test of longevity.

‘To take it a step further, he mixed it with several infected blood samples. He tested it against Salmonella typhi (bacteria causing typhoid), Streptococcus pneumoniae, Vibrio cholerae, Ebola, influenza and so on. Tej was absolutely stupefied to see that Om’s blood cells were perfectly immune to all the pathogens, resulting in a blood rich with all sorts of antibodies.

‘The absurdity of the situation made it seem as though the black blood cells were mocking Tej and his competence. Instead of considering this revelation a boon disguised as an opportunity, he mistook it for a challenge.

Before he knew it, Dr Tej was at an unsolicited war with the black blood cells and refused to give up. He subjected the blood to 2500°C, a temperature hot enough to melt iron, and recorded the effect on the sample. Strikingly, the black blood cells fused together to prepare a kind of insulation around the other blood cells and froze themselves to the exact opposite temperature at -2500°C, protecting them from the heat. Tej then subjected the sample to an extremely low temperature, only to find that the black blood cells banded again and worked the opposite way by heating themselves up, this time to neutralize the external conditions, hence keeping the red and white blood cells safe, just the way Parashurama and Ashwatthama were protecting Om. But what were Parashurama and Ashwatthama preparing Om for?' an agitated Mrs Batra thought out loud.

'For his own death,' Prithvi shrugged.

Mrs Batra's jaw dropped slightly at his nonchalance. But she knew that there were no simple answers. She would have to just sit back and wait for Prithvi to complete recollecting what he had seen, no matter how obscure it was to listen to a man speak of parallel events which he wasn't even born to witness.

'It was 3 a.m. when the submarine arrived at its destination,' Prithvi resumed the narrative.

Digha beach was nearby, and so Parimal knocked on the watertight door of the restricted chamber. Nagendra was already prepared with a packed bag and a round metal bottle hanging from his neck when he opened the door before the third knock. The same wrath followed him outside, bringing merciless pain to LSD and Parimal again. The pain was so excruciating that a crew member crossing the lobby at that unfortunate moment turned to pulp and died immediately.

An unfazed Nagendra shoved the pile of death inside the chamber with a swift foot and shut the door, relieving the other two survivors from their terrorized form.

The submarine tore through the surface of the waters. Parimal's boat, which he had used at Ross Island, was employed again to drop the team off. Nagendra was the first one to set foot on the shore and started to march away like a horse with blinders, which had nothing but victory in its line of vision.

LSD looked back to check on Parimal, who was still unloading their bags from the boat. Looking at their tardiness, Nagendra yelled at them in his

thundering yet ominous voice, ‘It is a race against time. Time will not stop for me and I will not stop for anyone. I have only nine days to reach.’

‘Where do we have to be in nine days?’ LSD asked with a shaky voice as she jogged towards Nagendra to keep up.

Nagendra handed her a folded piece of an old, embossed paper.

By the time Parimal joined them, Nagendra had started walking again. LSD crouched and opened the paper to see it better. The piece of paper was ripped out of the books of Mrit Sanjeevani, depicting a sea at its right end, mountains on its top and a red line drawn between them. It was hard to tell which part of the world it was. Parimal read the confusion on LSD’s face, picked up the glass shard of a broken liquor bottle near him and started to outline what could be around the torn part of this map. LSD decoded his strokes with a mystified look before Parimal stopped drawing altogether.

It couldn’t be, Parimal thought. It was the map of India that the stray piece belonged to. That little piece was a depiction of the eastern coast of India at one end and the Himalayan range on the other. The red line, which ran from Digha beach to the foothills of the mysterious Mount Kailash, was the route they were to trek in the next nine days. Still concerned by the incomplete knowledge of where they were headed to, Parimal and LSD spotted Nagendra, who had already covered a lot of distance. LSD tucked the map safely in her bag and they scurried to catch up with Nagendra.

Chapter 3

Nanshaad

Meanwhile, up on Kailash Parbat, Om was eager to know more about the legendary Milarepa, and so he asked, ‘I have heard and read so much about you. Some stories say that you eventually retreated to dwelling in caves, but that’s speculation and not the whole truth, isn’t it? But firstly, how do you know about me?’

Milarepa looked at Ashwatthama as if seeking his approval and Ashwatthama nodded reassuringly.

‘Let me take you back to the beginning. In my younger days, fuelled by pure vengeance, I destroyed many lives. I left home on my mother’s request and studied sorcery to channel my hatred. My mother passed away, but I continued with my revenge, assuming that’s what dutiful sons do—they avenge their mother’s suffering. Numerous innocent souls had to bear the brunt of my violence.

‘In my years of retreat, I repented my actions and became a student of Marpa, the translator. Before Marpa accepted me, I had to endure a great deal of arduous labour performing tasks he had devised. On his orders, I would start building a tower but halfway through, he would ask me to tear it down and start from scratch. This happened again and again. I would erect the column, only to raze it to the ground. After the third round of building and demolition, I was asked to construct a final multistorey tower at Se village in Lhodrag, Tibet, which still stands.

‘Eventually, Marpa accepted me as his disciple. He explained that the construction and destruction was a way for me to atone for my negative karma. Even though I understood that, I always wondered why it was always towers that he had me build. It was only when I came to India that I got my answer. Back then, though, the territory that constituted India was very different from what it is now . . .

‘Marpa taught me everything he knew and when his lessons ended, he took me to his teacher, Naropa, who was born in an upper-class Brahmin household in Bengal. This brought me to India for the first time. Many

scholars of various ages were practising Sutra[*] and Tantra,[†] like me. Upon the completion of Naropa's teachings, it was time to leave. I was uncertain about how to proceed further so I posed my dilemma to him.

'"I am grateful for your guidance, but I still don't see my true purpose," I said to Naropa.

'"I have taught you everything I could. Now it is time you set out to find your own path again. You must journey through India to find a man named Nanshaad (ननशाद) and seek his counsel," he said.

'I bade him farewell and embarked on my odyssey through India. After wandering for a few years in the quest for Nanshaad, I arrived at a city named Saket, which means heaven in Sanskrit. It was known as the land of Lord Ram and is presently called Ayodhya. There, I finally learnt the whereabouts of Nanshaad. I was directed to a village he resided in, approximately 640 km from Ayodhya, which is modern-day Bisrakh. After an exhausting journey over several days, I finally reached Bisrakh, brimming with hope.

'At the village's entrance, the first person I came across was an old man who was working on the construction of an unfinished building. I went ahead and asked him, "Do you know who Nanshaad is around here?"

'He eyed me strangely before picking up a dry leaf off the ground and talking to it. I repeated my question, in case he hadn't heard me properly the first time, but he dismissed me rudely and then continued talking to the dry leaf in his hand! I looked around to see if there was anyone else who could help me out, but it was just him with his half-built structure, and so I walked on to continue my search.

'For the next three days, I asked the natives about the man who had me tracing the country for him. It was a small hamlet, so I made sure I tried my luck everywhere. But to my grave disappointment, not a single soul knew anything about Nanshaad. With no other option left, I decided to return to Tibet with a heavy heart.

'On my way back, I passed the same old man who was still busy working on the incomplete structure. The villagers informed me that he was the sole labourer of whatever was standing of the structure. Given his shrivelled state, it was clear that death could come knocking at his doorstep any moment. I pitied him. I had become fairly adept at building towers for Marpa, and I was also at the dead end of my quest for Nanshaad.

Considering the building's completion to be the old man's last wish, I decided to help him finish the construction.

'I offered him my help, but he refused bluntly. I assured him that I didn't want anything in return. His age and fragility made me wonder how he had the kind of grit and motivation to build anything at that point in his life. To take the conversation forward, I asked him casually whom he was building it for.

'He suddenly turned towards me and asked, "Whom do you plan to do it for? For yourself or for me?"

'I wasn't prepared for that question at all. I stood there speechless, trying to find the answer for my own sake rather than for the satisfaction of a response. Before offering him my service, I really hadn't thought about my motivation for it. The old man stared at my brooding face for some time and then set a condition—as if I needed his help more than he needed mine! He said that I would not question him about anything until I finished. I agreed.

'*Whom was I doing it for?* This question became the reason for me to finish the structure without any questioning. I accepted his condition, and he accepted my offer.

'As I stepped inside, the old man called out for someone named Malti. In there was a large door made out of stone. It was shut, so I assumed that Malti would walk out from there, but then I heard him say, "There you are. Come here."

'I followed his gaze to see where Malti was. All I could see was a dead leaf on the ground. He was smiling down at it . . . and the dead leaf fluttered up to sit on his palm! That's when I realized it was actually a butterfly that looked like a dry leaf when its wings were at rest.

'"Meet Malti," he said.

'"How did you manage to tame a wild butterfly?" I asked, intrigued by what had just happened.

'The grave stare from his hollow eyes was enough to remind me of the condition we had just agreed upon; there was no scope for any questions. He then pointed towards the huge stone door and said, "You are not allowed to walk inside that room. Don't even try it. Malti, keep an eye on him."

'All set for work, I started the construction the next morning.

'The next few months, we worked in silence. His bitterness remained a constant until the last day. He never talked to me. Every day, he would open the door just enough to get in and stay locked away for six hours after

sunset. Meanwhile, I would cook for both of us and carry on with my meditation and regular practices. Malti would always sit on a specific damp spot on the wall, facing me. I tried to befriend her, but she never budged. It sometimes felt as if she was genuinely following orders and keeping an eye on me when the old man was not around.

'Malti would be on the lookout diligently every day until one unpleasant morning when I woke up to see that she was dying. It was evident that those were her last few hours. I was feeling the loss already, but the old man remained inexpressive and unbothered. He was occupied trying to capture a lizard on the wall and needed an insect to lure it. The next thing I knew, he picked up the dying Malti and used her as bait. That heartless bastard! Pardon my language, but it was just infuriating. As the lizard inched closer to Malti, she turned towards me, and I imagined her vulnerability. In the blink of an eye, the lizard gulped Malti alive. Her dead-leaf wings fell on the ground and the lizard chewed up her remnants while the old man watched the gruesome scene with much excitement. He carefully took the lizard off the wall and began walking towards his room. When he looked back at me, his eyes were twinkling as he cupped the reptile in his palms. "She is pregnant. Her offspring will be my next pet," he said, walking like a mischievous child back to the forbidden room, and locking himself in again.

'Malti's isolated wings blew with the wind as dry leaves usually do. I was dejected. But more than that, I was curious to know what exactly he did behind that door. But questioning him was forbidden. I had sweated with him for several months, yet he had not even bothered to ask me my name. Regardless, I continued my work as promised. A few days later, he came up to me with a tiny lizard on his palm. It was a male lizard this time, which had never seen its mother because he had killed her along with the rest of her litter and eaten them. He named his new pet Kark. A couple of weeks passed by and Kark became the new resident of Malti's damp spot, keeping an eye on me in the old man's absence.

'In the following six months, I built the pillars of the veranda, the central structure over the roof, and the passages on the sides. At some point during the construction I began to apprehend that this was no ordinary building; it had a special purpose. Given the old man's frail physique, I suspected that I would never learn his true intentions—his cremation might just predate the construction's completion! During those months, I also witnessed many other sorcerers and yogis come to Bisrakh in search of Nanshaad. The old

man ignored all their enquiries as he had ignored mine and I gave the same answer to all of them, that there was no such man in the village. Days turned into nights and after a whole year, the construction was finally complete. That day, I finally realized that the structure was actually a shrine for some deity. The external architecture suggested that the forbidden room was actually the sanctum, and its design was unlike that of any other Hindu temple I had seen or heard of before. That night, I stayed up late to clean the place while the old man remained locked in as usual.

'It had been only a few years since I had moved to India from Tibet, and I was still in the process of learning about its colossal culture and religions. I learnt that in Hindu rituals, the ceremony of establishing the deity's idol in the temple is called *sthaapana*, which was going to take place the next day.

'It was dawn. The old man woke me up and asked me to leave instantly as my work was finished. I realized that I was no longer bound by his condition of not asking any questions. Recalling the question he had asked me in the beginning, I finally answered him. "You asked me who I was doing it for, remember? I did not know which god this shrine was being erected for, so I didn't do it for divinity. After leaving this place, I will be moving on with my life, so I certainly did not do it for myself. That leaves you, so I built this for you."

'Eyeing the heavy stone door, I asked, "Who did *you* build this for?"

'"I ask you a single question but you seek two answers. I shall answer only one, after which you must leave. Decide for yourself which question is more significant to you," replied the rude and stubborn old man.

'But I had asked him just one question, so I was confused. I wanted to ask him what the other one was, but given his curt demeanour, I knew that I would be left with both my queries and zero answers.

'"Hurry up! I have to initiate the proceedings of sthaapana. I don't have all day for you to respond," the old man was losing patience.

'Before I could respond, a wandering scholar stopped by and asked him, "Do you know who Nanshaad is here?"

'I looked at the old man with startling realization—that was what he meant by *two* questions! The scholar waited for a few moments but when he got no response, he walked to the other side to ask someone else. I decided to take my chance.

'"Answer my first question," I said with wide, hopeful eyes.

‘Kark climbed on him and sat on his shoulder. He looked at Kark, caressed him under his chin and sighed, “I am the name which brought you all the way to Bisrakh. I am Nanshaad!”

‘And then he retreated to the forbidden room, leaving me baffled, with my eyes fixed on him. I had been working the entire year for the man I came in search of, without knowing that he was indeed the one.

‘Dawn changed to dusk and soon, the stars came out. I simply sat there, waiting for him to come out. Never before that day had Nanshaad stayed indoors for that long. Long past midnight, he finally emerged and found me standing right where he had left me, with no trace of surprise in his expression. He went back inside, leaving the door open. For the first time in a year, I took a glimpse inside. An incredible force of energy radiating from the sanctum engulfed me. After several years, I felt the same level of malice and hatred coursing through me, but this time the fury was accompanied by immense strength. I was absorbing so much power that I started bleeding from my nostrils. Within a few moments, my consciousness left my body and I dropped down on the ground. The last thing I saw before my eyes shut completely was a hazy figure, and it was certainly not Nanshaad.

‘When I regained consciousness, half my clothes were soaked in blood. Kark was sitting on my chest, looking into my eyes, and the sthaapana was already done. I got up to face a huge statue, standing almost 20 feet tall, with ten heads and numerous hands wielding weapons. Covered in ornaments of gold, it was placed on the platform that I had constructed for the deity. The sculpture emanated great intensity in its expression and posture.

‘“Whose idol is this?” I asked as I breathed in awe.’

Before Milarepa could quote Nanshaad, Ashwatthama chimed in, ‘Ravana, the demon king of Lanka.’ Meeting Om’s eyes, he continued, ‘Bisrakh is situated in what is now Greater Noida in Uttar Pradesh and is believed to be the birthplace of King Ravana. The land has ancient temples in abundance. The Swayambhu* Shiva linga, which was worshiped by Ravana and his father Vishravas, was unearthed there over a century ago. It is octagonal in shape. The linga protrudes 2.5 feet above the ground and allegedly extends 8 feet underneath. It is deified in a temple built near a large banyan tree and has a courtyard laid with marble where devotees worship daily.’

Milarepa nodded in agreement and added, ‘I constructed this unearthed sanctum before 1135. Now, a new shrine dedicated to the demon king is under construction, comprising a 42-feet Shiva linga and a 5.5-feet sculpture of Ravana. I was never aware that I was labouring over the development of Ravana’s temple.’

‘But I asked you how you knew about me. What does all of this have to do with me and my question?’ Om’s impatience was obvious.

‘It is essential for you to know why and how I met Nanshaad and who he was, because that has everything to do with you and your question. So listen carefully. Ravana went by numerous names like Dasis Ravana, Dasis Sakvithi, Maha Ravana, Dashaanan, Lankeshwar, Lankeshwaran, Ravanasura, Ravanaeshwaran, Eela Vendhar and Ravula.’

‘Yes, I know that. So?’

‘So, write down “Nanshaad” and read it backwards.’ Om complied. Once written and read in reverse, ननशाद became दशानन (Dashaanan), which was one of Ravana’s popular names.

Milarepa continued, ‘Like Ravana, Nanshaad also had many titles. One of them is Nagendra—the name that you once knew him as.’

Om was staggered to hear Nagendra’s name fall out of Milarepa’s mouth. ‘What happened then?’

‘Then? Then I left empty-handed from Bisrakh after the sthaapana of Dashaanan,’ replied Milarepa. With that, Om’s curiosity rose to a higher pitch than ever before. But he was not alone in that—the same curiosity was agitating Parimal and LSD, who were on their way to Kailash at that moment.

The journey from Digha beach had started nine days prior to the perfect crescent moon. They had travelled for twenty-two hours to reach the Nathu La Pass for their first halt.

At night, they checked into a secluded motel. After a quick dinner, they decided to meet in Nagendra’s room. Parimal stood beside LSD, waiting for further instructions from Nagendra, who was focused on the torn piece of map spread out on an old wooden table.

Nagendra began. ‘There are two ways to reach Kailash from India. One is through the Lipulekh Pass in Uttarakhand and the other is through the Nathu La Pass in Sikkim. The Lipulekh Pass used to be a popular option earlier, but it is now damaged due to the floods in Uttarakhand. The route via Sikkim crosses the India-China border at the Nathu La Pass.’ Pointing

to the dots marked on the route, Nagendra started explaining the roadmap. ‘From Nathu La, tomorrow, we will travel to Kangma, which is 185 km away. Then we will cover 295 km to Lazi, and then another 477 km to Zhongba. An additional 477 km from Zhongba will lead us to Darchen and later to Qugu.

‘This route from Nathu La Pass takes around five days and also offers a shorter transit to Kailash. We have spent one day out of nine already to reach Nathu La, which leaves us with eight days to reach Kailash on the perfect crescent moon night. This means we have three days to spare,’ Parimal reasoned.

‘No. We are already running two days late and we will have to compensate for them,’ Nagendra corrected him.

‘But you said five days,’ LSD interjected.

‘Five days on wheels. We are going on foot. The trek to Kailash is ideally undertaken between the months of वैसाख (April–May) and कार्तिक (October–November). Trekkers are advised against carrying out an expedition in the five months from मार्गशीर्ष: (November–December) to चैत्र (March–April) as it becomes tough to breathe and survive there. We have chosen to travel in माघ (January–February), which is the coldest and most difficult time of the year in that range. The roads are blocked and there is no commutation to our destination. This is why we require ten days or even more. Anyway, the night is growing darker. Go get some rest, because you won’t be able to get any for a long time after tonight. We leave tomorrow before sunrise.’

Nagendra closed his eyes and sat down to meditate, indicating that he had answered the last question for the day. At four in the morning, the team left for Kangma and then on to Lazi, the next two junctions en route to Kailash. Parimal, walking with LSD almost 100 metres behind Nagendra, looked at the sky and found the waning gibbous moon, signifying that barely eight days were left for the crescent moon to be seen.

‘What is it with the night of the crescent moon?’ Parimal asked LSD.

‘You will get the answer when the time is right,’ LSD responded curtly as they walked.

‘And who are you? When is the right time to get an answer for that?’ he frowned.

LSD thrust her chin out towards Nagendra, who was walking ahead of them. ‘Why don’t you just ask *him* all these questions?’ she challenged,

assuming that this would shut him up.

As was his nature, Parimal had been wondering what the link between Nagendra and Milarepa could be. There was no historical account of it. He was well aware that he couldn't ask him about Milarepa directly. So he decided to disguise this query as a question about the crescent moon. Therefore, he began drafting the query in his head. The crescent moon night was coming closer, hence the time was indeed right to ask *that* question at least; maybe that could give him a way to pry out some answers about Milarepa too.

A confused LSD watched Parimal walking more briskly towards Nagendra.

'What are you doing?' she hissed.

'You will get the answer when the time is right,' Parimal glanced back triumphantly as he closed the distance between Nagendra and himself. He reached right behind Nagendra and said, 'You don't trust us, right?'

Nagendra continued to walk while he replied, 'That's not true.'

Parimal was positive he had sparked a conversation that might get him some answers, and so he continued, 'LSD says that you don't tell us anything because you don't trust us.'

Nagendra's face betrayed no emotion as he replied, 'And what is it that you want to know?' Parimal looked around at LSD, who was still following the protocol of keeping a distance and not questioning anything.

'I want to know what Kailash Parbat has to do with the crescent moon night. She is afraid to ask you about the connection between you and the man who climbed Mount Kailash.'

Nagendra halted abruptly and said, 'You have two questions; I will answer only one of them. Decide for yourself which question is more significant to you, and I shall answer it.'

Mirroring Nagendra's pause, Parimal also stopped in his tracks, maintaining the distance. He thought for a moment and decided that the mystery of the crescent moon could be solved when they reached their destination, but there might not be another window to ask about the man who climbed the enigmatic Kailash Parbat. So he declared, 'I want the answer to her question.'

'Very well.' Nagendra gestured for Parimal to come closer and scowled at the recollection of his nemesis. 'I met Milarepa in Bisrakh, while building one of the oldest Dashaanan shrines. He won my heart by

selflessly helping me with the construction of the temple and left empty-handed after the sthaapana. But I . . . we couldn't let him leave. He didn't realize that not only his, but our work in Bisrakh was also completed. He did not realize that while he was searching for a guide and a guru, we were also waiting there for the right prodigy and accomplice. Milarepa did not realize that he was not the one to find us; we found him. So, the guide followed the wanderer. Yes, we tailed Milarepa for months from Bisrakh to the northern boundaries of this country until we were confident that he could be reliable. Finally, just when he had fully given up and was about to go beyond the border, we crossed his path again and took him under our wing. He was a good student at first. Later, he became one of our two best prodigies and then the second most trusted confidant, till he gave us the deepest gash of betrayal.'

'Us? We? One of the two best prodigies? Second most trusted confidant? What are you talking about? Who was the first one? Did I miss something?' Parimal was puzzled.

Nagendra heard all his fresh doubts calmly and said, 'I told you that I will answer only one question.' Parimal had no choice but to suppress his queries and let Nagendra finish.

'He had a great quality of never doubting our decisions and so he never questioned or reasoned with anything that we were doing. He gained our faith and we taught him everything we knew until he became as zealous as me. Together, we tracked Om, meticulously tracing the places where we got hints about him or suspected his presence. However, he kept changing his name, identity and location, so I did too, but Milarepa couldn't do it because lying was a sin according to his principles of morality and ethics, so he chose to remain mum. He was so silent and submissive to our mission that he never even asked the name of the man we were chasing, or why. Milarepa, the perfect accomplice,' Nagendra trailed off, reminiscing about those times.

'His silence was so constant that people presumed he was mute. But his quietness was what we mistook as his sincere compliance to our objective. After failing uncountable times at nabbing Om, one day, Milarepa spoke after several years. "Maybe I could serve you better if I knew who the man is and what he possesses that we want so direly." *Maybe he could indeed serve us better if he knew*, we thought, thus revealing our biggest secret to Milarepa. We took him to Dharagiri.'

While Nagendra talked about Milarepa to Parimal, heading towards Mount Kailash, up on the mountain was Milarepa, talking about Nagendra to Om.

‘What is Dharagiri?’ Milarepa looked at Om before answering. He gathered the courage to speak about this part and looked at Ashwatthama, who also glanced at Om. He then signalled that Milarepa should resume his story.

‘Dharagiri is a waterfall in the Ghatshila district of Jharkhand. The whole area was flourishing with forests and hills, and I had no idea that a place so splendid could also be the site of such barbarism! Hidden behind the waterfall was a cave where, for the first time, I witnessed a man in the most dreadful physical condition a human being could ever be imagined in. I looked at him through a crack between the rocks, where he couldn’t see me. He was breathing but was neither alive nor dead. He was so skinny and disfigured that it pained me to even keep looking at him. I asked Nanshaad, “Who is he?”

‘“He is the one who let Om escape. He is Dhanvantari,” explained Nanshaad.

Om could not believe the preposterous words he was hearing. Someone was telling him that Dhanvantari had been alive for that long!

‘At that time, I had no clue about you and your endless existence. Nanshaad narrated everything beginning from your creation till your escape when he had attacked Dhanvantari and—’

‘Sushruta . . .’ Om added, his emotions weighing down his voice.

‘He had kept Dhanvantari alive since then, torturing and compelling him to write the book of Mrit Sanjeevani for him all over again as these were the only two options he had in order to avoid death.’ Learning about Dhanvantari’s state was not only harrowing but also bewildering to Om.

On their way to Kailash, Nagendra recounted as they trudged on, ‘I was alive but my body was decaying from within because, unlike Om, I cannot prevent ageing. Although I managed to slow the process to the extent that I was ageing as much as a single day over the span of multiple years, I was falling short of time in my physical form. I shared everything with Milarepa so that he could understand the urgency of both, searching for Om and getting the information out of Dhanvantari. Milarepa promised that he would do everything to get the books for me. Together, we hatched a plan to send Milarepa undercover into Dhanvantari’s chamber as another prisoner.

‘Inside the chamber, Milarepa pretended that he couldn’t speak. To win Dhanvantari’s heart, he looked after him, cleaned and fed him, but Dhanvantari did not utter a word. It was a subtle war of silence between the two while Kark was my eyes and ears on their prison walls. Days turned into weeks and weeks into months and soon, Kark died a natural death in that dungeon, but nothing decayed between the two prisoners: neither Milarepa’s dedication nor Dhanvantari’s silence. I eventually replaced Kark with Kuroop.’

‘Kuroop? Who was it this time?’ asked Parimal.

‘My new pet, a hyena!’

‘There was one thing they had in common—stubbornness.’ Nagendra’s rage was boiling as he continued to envision Milarepa but he composed himself, curbing his frustration.

‘Dhanvantari wouldn’t utter a single word and Milarepa wouldn’t budge without hearing him talk. Neither of them was giving up. Ultimately, after eighteen months of silence, Dhanvantari spoke to Milarepa. We could not hear them talk, but at least the first barrier of communication was broken. Right then, based on the pattern of Om’s travel history decoded by Milarepa, we learnt that Om was last spotted in Avanti, which is now known as Ujjain and is in central India.

‘Thus, we left Kuroop to guard Dhanvantari and Milarepa for a few days and headed to Avanti to check the information.’

‘So that’s how Nagendra located me in Avanti?’ Om realized.

Milarepa replied, ‘Yes! When Nanshaad told me about the cities you were visiting back then, I figured that your migration wasn’t arbitrary and observed the pattern you were travelling in. You were returning to each location you had left after a certain number of years with a new name, meeting all the old people of the locality, posing as your own son, and if I was right, the next place you were journeying towards was Avanti again.’

‘I escaped that raid by a hair out of sheer luck. What happened when he came back?’ Om asked Milarepa. At the same time, Nagendra was answering that question for Parimal.

‘When we came back, Milarepa was gone. He had fled after receiving all the information from Dhanvantari. I found Kuroop’s dead body at the entrance. Kuroop was murdered. He cheated us; we had misunderstood him all along. He was a traitor masquerading as an ally. He was gone and with him, one out of the two opportunities to get to Mrit Sanjeevani *was also*

gone.’ Nagendra’s words came to a halt but his feet still moved towards their destination.

‘So, did he kill Kuroop to rescue Dhanvantari?’ Parimal enquired, eager to gain clarity. Nagendra turned to look at Parimal, who was approaching him to get the answer. Remembering that Milarepa’s betrayal led to his defeat, Nagendra suddenly grabbed Parimal by his throat. Parimal was caught off guard and struggled to breathe. Nagendra pulled him closer to his face with a jerk and sneered, ‘You know, hyenas are capable of eating all sorts of animals, whether it’s their own prey or a rotting corpse—from wild beasts and birds to lizards and snakes, everything! Their jaws are strong enough to crush bones. But Kuroop didn’t eat Kark, I did.’

Parimal began to choke. He struggled to speak despite Nagendra’s death grip. ‘I . . . ca—can’t breathe!’ LSD was a mere spectator and stood there quietly.

Nagendra used his other hand to pinch Parimal’s tongue tightly between his thumb and index finger and said, ‘You could be a better servant if you couldn’t speak. Like Kuroop. But the absence of voice wouldn’t allow you to tell me that you can’t breathe. You wouldn’t defend yourself. So, you see, everything is double-edged, with a good and a bad side, even your tongue. It saves you today, but it can push you to your death tomorrow.’ Nagendra released Parimal’s neck and tongue and he immediately fell to his knees, violently gasping for air. Nagendra crouched beside him before saying, ‘LSD didn’t ask any of those questions—you did! Next time you lie, you die.’ Leaving him there, he carried on.

Parimal took a minute to collect his wits. LSD came up and offered her hand. He held her blurry palm to pull himself up and saw Nagendra striding ahead. Nagendra’s fingers had left prominent marks on his throat. Now he knew his place as he walked with LSD again, with the last question about what happened to Dhanvantari suspended in his head.

‘So, what did Dhanvantari tell you?’ asked Om.

‘Dhanvantari cried and told me that you were alone in this world and it was imperative that Parashurama knew about you as well as what you possessed. It was then that I realized the purpose of my life, which I had set out to find in the first place. It was not Nanshaad where my destiny lay; he was only a part of the journey. Everything that happened in my life led me to Dhanvantari so that I could learn the ultimate reason for my birth. Dhanvantari was the one who told me about the city of Gyanganj and how

to reach Parashurama, which led me to summit the great Kailash and attain salvation. Therefore, these books of history recognize Milarepa as the only man who ever climbed Kailash Parbat. Om, you must now know that I did it for you. I reached Parashurama for you.'

'What about Dhanvantari? Did you set him free?' asked Om.

'How could I have left Dhanvantari in that hell on earth? Of course I set him free. I killed him,' replied Milarepa with a hint of remorse.

Om felt like someone had lit a fire in the pit of his stomach. Before he could process the information rationally, he came charging at Milarepa with burning rage. Ashwatthama was quick to hold Om back, but the force was enough to knock Milarepa to the ground. Understanding that Om's anger was justified, he got up calmly. Ashwatthama kept an arm around Om's shoulders to console him as he tried to compose himself. Om turned around with teary eyes and said, 'The books are gone. Dhanvantari died in vain. We have lost the war already, before even fighting it. Now we have nothing to fight for.'

Ashwatthama spoke softly, 'We have you. Everything that has happened so far is just the tip of the iceberg. You must know what Parashurama told me when you were lying unconscious on the rocks near the seashore on Ross Island. You will be the one who will defend us the next time we face Nagendra. Only you have the ability to remember who you were before becoming an immortal. What if there is something still worth fighting for? The war doesn't end till the world exists. Can you fight if there is still something worth fighting for?'

'And what could that be?' Om scoffed hopelessly.

'The question is not *what's worth it*; the question is, can you fight?'

Om stood answerless. Ashwatthama continued, 'War has only one purpose and that's victory. The responsibility for your triumph lies in my hands. You need to be trained for battle and I will ensure that you are ready. Your training starts tomorrow.'

Chapter 4

One Word and Two Lakes

‘After thoroughly examining the nature of Om’s blood sample and obtaining full proof of its indestructible nature, Tej wanted to analyse its resistance against pathogens. He took Pooh, a healthy guinea pig he had in his lab for conducting experiments on, and injected it with the Marburg virus. Leaving it in the room, Tej closed the door behind him so the guinea pig wouldn’t get out,’ Mrs Batra recounted. The room upstairs was chock-full of a plethora of high-end medical equipment and discrete medicines, but somehow still seemed empty. The light hum of beeping monitors filled the air.

‘This was taken during those days,’ added Mrs Batra as she handed a picture to Prithvi. Prithvi saw the limp, tiny Mrs Batra on the bed surrounded by medicines and monitors. Her body looked like it had been reduced to nothingness. ‘I saw Tej enter the room with a comforting smile, and just for a moment I felt peaceful. I loved him. But the very next moment, the agonizing throb was back. My head swirled as a fresh wave of pain blurred my vision while my back muscles spasmed wildly. Any outsider could’ve easily mistaken it for a seizure, but this was different. Despite the extensive research about multiple sclerosis, I was beyond the scope of being saved.

‘Tej rushed to the big compartment of medicines lined up in almost an army formation and took out an injection. He held my hand down firmly and as the fluid flooded my veins, I was stable again. I mustered up a smile to make him feel better, but my eyes couldn’t lie. Tej could see in them that he was losing me, my memory was fading away. He climbed into bed with me and held me like a baby. I lay there, numb, clueless about the treatment he was putting me through, even though he knew that no medicine could save me.

‘For a few hours, Tej stayed beside me. His heart broke at the sight of my misery, but it shattered further at the thought of it all ending along with me. He clasped my hands tightly whenever the pain grew unbearable. I kept

breathing and fighting just to live one more day of life with him. When he recounted the incident later, he shared what it felt like for him to be losing me. Pooh and I were at the same stages of our lives. We both barely breathed, we hardly moved, our vitals were deteriorating rapidly. Tej returned to his basement lab. He placed Pooh on his worktable. It was time to test the miracle!

'Tej took a drop of Om's blood sample in a syringe and injected the dying guinea pig with it. The previously undefeated black blood cells were Tej's last hope, they had to come through!

'When Tej checked on the guinea pig again, it had stopped struggling and its symptoms seemed to be reducing in severity. Happy with the progress, he breathed a sigh of relief. He could, after all, save the love of his life.' Mrs Batra took a break with a sigh and said to Prithvi, 'Anyway, what happened next with Om and Nagendra?'

Prithvi could gauge that she was hesitant to say anything further and needed more time to trust him fully, so Prithvi continued narrating his story.

Hiking uninterrupted for days on end, Nagendra and his team crossed Kangma and Lazi at dawn. The next stops were Zhongba and Darchen, which brought them closer to Kailash Parbat.

Meanwhile, on Kailash, the morning breeze was as chilly as ever and the open field was all set for Om's first day of training. The sun's emerging red blended with the night's fading black seamlessly. Ashwatthama brought Om to a makeshift rocky platform where an assortment of ancient metallic weapons had been placed upright. Om stood amazed and watched as they glinted in the dark. This set-up was the complete opposite of his expectations. He had expected such weapons to have vanished forever along with the warriors who wielded them, or to at least be entirely rusted by now, if they had been preserved at all. But there they were, right in front of his eyes, along with one of the vanished warriors who had used these weapons once.

Om carefully moved closer, his eyes scanning each one of those weapons minutely. Eventually, his gaze came to rest on a quiver full of arrows.

He wondered out loud, 'What about those modern weapons that you had brought along to rescue me at the island? Those pistols and rifles were way more advanced and sophisticated than these simple arrows. Aren't you going to train me with those? Why have you brought—' Suddenly, the tip of the arrow he had just touched sent him flying off 40 feet into the air. In a

millisecond, more than 7,00,000 volts, the kind found in a high-tension transmission wire, travelled through his whole body and tossed him back to the ground like burnt toast. The shock was more than sufficient to kill an ordinary man, and Om, despite being Om, also barely survived. The right side of his body was completely charred, exposing the bones that his skin was sticking to, and his nerves were as black as ink. He was so gravely wrecked that he could not get back to his feet. He lay on the ground grunting, trying to understand what had just happened.

As Om's wounds healed slowly on their own, Ashwatthama clasped the same arrow in his hand, walked towards Om and explained, 'Because today can never win over yesterday, and neither can tomorrow. The foundation of all science is ancient science, which is now mostly trapped in books scattered around the world—many have even been destroyed. More than half of ancient science is yet to be discovered and deciphered. What is proclaimed to have been invented is actually just a discovery of principles and inventions that the ancient scientists, mathematicians, physicians and engineers had already experimented with and written about millennia ago. Sushruta wrote the *Sushruta Samhita*, uniquely describing surgical training, instruments and procedures, which is still followed by the contemporary science of surgery. Modern inventions are nothing but discoveries of science during the prehistoric ages, which the world calls mythology now. Planes in this part of the planet have flown way before the invention of so-called airplanes claimed by the Wright brothers in 1903. The distance between the earth and the sun, that is 149,597,870 km, had already been calculated and written in the Hanuman Chalisa aeons ago, even before my birth, not after 1653. We have been praying to the nine planets since before the Ramayana, not after the invention of the telescope in 1608. Do you really think that people who wrote and implemented intricate books like the *Vimana Purana*, which today's scientists have now started finding relevance in, had never contemplated the presence of *gurutvakarshan*, which was later called gravitational force? Do you think that writing a comprehensive purana on flying would have been possible without a precise understanding of gravitational force? A Sanskrit verse from Brahmagupta's book *Brahmasphutasiddhanta* says, "A body falls towards the earth as it is the nature of the earth to attract bodies, just as it is the nature of water to flow." This statement indicates Brahmagupta's grasp of the concept of gravity, which was later elaborated by another Indian astronomer, Bhaskara II, in his

book *Surya Siddhanta* in 1150. All of this occurred way before Isaac Newton. Brahmagupta died in 668 CE and Bhaskara II wrote his book in 1150. Newton's *Principia*, which describes gravity, was published in 1687, which was more than 500 years later.

'Contemporary science and modern artillery are no match for the knowledge of ancient science and the power and destruction that these ancient weapons possess. I used modern weaponry on Ross Island because those were the weakest among all the weapons I have mastered. They were enough to rescue you from humans, but what lies ahead cannot be fought with those toys.'

By this time, much of Om's tissues had been restored, but he still struggled to stand up on his feet. Ashwatthama bent and tied a *rudraksha* on his unharmed left arm. 'With this, we start the guru-shishya tradition. I will teach you about all the *astras* I possess,' Ashwatthama said as he initiated his teachings.

'Rule number one: never touch a weapon that you have not possessed. You cannot hold it unless it allows you to. Imagine a furious sabretooth on a leash with its master, Vrishkapi. What will happen if you try to hold the tiger's leash? The sabretooth will tear you apart. He will never allow anyone but his master to come close to him. You can only interact with him after you befriend him. You can only order him once you have mastered him. These weapons, they submit to you. But before that, you need to know them, learn them and win them over. These weapons are divine weapons called astras and the bearer of these weapons is called *astradhari*, which you are clearly not so far.' By this time, the sun had risen higher in the sky, causing the shining metallic arrow to lose its radiance and turn into an ordinary, corroded one, just the way Om had imagined earlier.

'I was aware of what you just told me about the astras, but I didn't know they could still be in existence,' Om replied, amazed. His remaining burns and abrasions continued to heal and Ashwatthama gave him a hand to help him get back up on his feet.

'Summoning an astra requires the use of a specific chant. Every astra has a chant that commands and controls it. Once the chant is recited, the concerned god endows the weapon with divine power, making it impossible to counter by regular means. There are specific conditions for the use of astras, the violation of which can be fatal. Because of the great power involved, the knowledge of an astra is passed on in the guru-shishya

tradition from a guru (master) to a shishya (follower) by oral instruction only, and only after judging the capabilities of the student. Certain astras were so mighty that the mere knowledge of the chant was insufficient, so they had to be handed down directly by the deity involved.

'The extensive use of astras began during the time of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Yet, not every warrior had astras. You've met some of those who did.'

Ashwatthama was right. Om had indeed met some of them, including Lord Ram and Lord Laxman; Bhishma, the son of River Ganga; Dronacharya, Ashwatthama's father; Karna, the spiritual son of the sun; and Arjun, the spiritual son of Indra.

'The three who still have astras are Parashurama, Kripacharya and I.' Om's eyes twinkled as the name of the third immortal of Hindu mythology fell on his ears. 'Kripacharya? Where is he?'

'That is not known. He comes only when needed and only I can summon him,' Ashwatthama replied with a hint of pride.

'The celestial astras are usually evoked using arrows, although they can potentially be evoked by any weapon or anything else. I invoked the Brahmashirsha astra using a blade of grass as my weapon. Indra's son, Arjuna, was capable of shooting all his celestial weapons with the power of his mind alone. He didn't need any physical vessel for the astra to manifest in.'

Ashwatthama then brought Om back to the weapons that looked like innocuous antique armaments in the sunlight. They were only empty vessels; their power was channelled through the celestial astras.

'These are some of the astras that I possess,' Ashwatthama said, picking up one in his hand. 'This is Vayuastra. It brings about a hurricane capable of lifting entire armies off the ground. On the fourteenth day of the war in Kurukshetra, when the battle continued past sunset, I used this weapon to breach the illusions that Anjanaparvan, the grandson of Bhima and the son of Ghatotkacha, had created. Arjuna also used the Vayuastra against Karna in the final battle.' So saying, Ashwatthama put the arrow back in the quiver.

'Now, sit down and meditate to invoke Vayu, the God of Wind. This will take five whole days, so prepare yourself. Repeat the chant after me.' Ashwatthama sat down and started chanting, with Om repeating his words.

The entire open field reverberated with their vibrations. The ground, the grass, the wind, the sky—everything seemed like one being.

Days passed and the chant echoed constantly on Kailash. Meanwhile, Nagendra and his team, with their heavily packed bags, passed Zhongba and Darchen, inching closer to their final destination.

A freezing temperature of –14°C had LSD shivering relentlessly and walking with Parimal behind Nagendra through the final highs and lows of the terrain.

Parimal noticed that Nagendra had come to a halt and was looking at the view in front of them. Parimal and LSD joined him. A reflection of Mount Kailash was visible on the surface of the majestic lake. They stood there for a while, admiring and soaking in the serenity. The setting sun merging with the horizon added a striking, shimmery hue to the lake's surface, and it seemed that the whole cosmos had simply melted into it. The freshness of the atmosphere around them washed away their struggles and exhaustion. At an altitude of 22,028 feet above sea level, the sight of that abode of purity, nestled in the lap of nature, left both LSD and Parimal awestruck. The mystical lake, round, with clear blue water around the shores and emerald-green in the centre, gave them a moment of bliss.

Emerging from her reverie, LSD said breathlessly, 'So, we were not headed for Mount Kailash? Where are we?'

Parimal, still mesmerized, started explaining.

'This is Lake Mansarovar. *Manas* means "mind" and *sarovar* means "lake" in Sanskrit, which, compounded, form, "lake of the mind". Hindu scriptures say that Brahma had conceived this lake in his mind and it received visible manifestation later, thus the name. Lake Mansarovar is a personification of purity, and one who drinks its water supposedly goes straight to the abode of Shiva after death. They are believed to be cleansed of all sins committed over even a hundred lifetimes. The existence of such a magnificent freshwater lake at such a height above sea level is indeed remarkable.'

Both LSD and Parimal now turned towards Nagendra, but neither dared to ask him any questions regarding the current standstill they had come to. Nagendra looked at them and read their curiosity.

He said, 'We are here to search for a word . . . the first word of the mystic enchantment that will liberate them all. Look for a hideout between the rocks that could conceal our lights at night, set up two tents and wait for the

right time.’ LSD and Parimal silently got to work without asking, ‘The first word of which mystic enchantment and liberate who all?’

On the eve of the crescent moon, right before sunset, Om opened his eyes after five days and looked at Ashwatthama, who instructed him to stand and pick up the Vayuastra. Om seemed a bit hesitant. Ashwatthama smiled and assured him that he would not be hurt again. Om lifted the Vayuastra and felt its power coursing through his blood. He had done it! Ashwatthama beamed at his disciple proudly and gave him a warm hug.

‘Well done, Om. Go to sleep now. You have not slept a wink in five nights. You need to rest. I shall see you tomorrow at dawn,’ said Ashwatthama, relieving Om from their long meditation. Om obeyed the order just the way LSD and Parimal obeyed their superior.

The sun withdrew and darkness replaced twilight. The temperature at Mansarovar dropped even lower. LSD and Parimal were done setting up the tents in an appropriate hideout between the rocks. As they finished, wondering why they were supposed to put up two tents instead of three, Nagendra came and ordered them both to walk with him to the west of Mansarovar. They shared a look and joined Nagendra in the darkening night. The sky was starry, but the moon was still not visible. They tramped through the pitch black alongside Nagendra. LSD took out a torch, but before she could switch it on, Nagendra stopped her. ‘Light is celebrated only due to the fear of the dark. Without evil, goodness has no value.’

As Mansarovar was the calmest of all lakes, even in the worst climatic conditions, serenity draped the air around them till the sound of the waves rippled through the quietness. They advanced a few more steps. ‘We have not come here for Mansarovar or for Kailash Parbat,’ said Nagendra, moving closer to the sound of the waves.

As they walked on the west bank of Mansarovar, Parimal and LSD wondered where the sound could possibly be coming from. The crashing of the waves grew louder with every step. After a few minutes, they felt as if they had reached some vast shore. Nagendra stopped and looked up into the sky. LSD and Parimal wondered what Nagendra was searching for. They had been waiting patiently for almost an hour when the sky began to brighten slowly with moonlight, and then emerged the moon in its perfect crescent, illuminating the land around them in a silver mist.

LSD and Parimal’s eyes fell upon the source of the sound of crashing waves as Nagendra addressed them, ‘We have come here for the first word.’

It was another lake they were now standing close to, its shore covered with beautiful but poisonous Euphorbia flowers that grew amid the sand and gravel.

Nagendra explained further, ‘This is Rakshastal, also called the Ravana Lake or the lake of demons. Rakshastal was created by Ravana for the express purpose of garnering superpowers through acts of devotion and meditation towards Lord Shiva, who resided on Mount Kailash. He would make a daily offering with one of his ten heads as a sacrifice to please Shiva. Finally, on the tenth night, when Ravana intended to offer his last head, Shiva was moved enough to grant Ravana his wish to harness superpowers. It was on a crescent moon night that his wish was fulfilled and so the lake acquired the shape of the crescent moon. Tonight, all the planets and the moon are aligned in their exact same positions as that night. Thousands of years ago, it was the same night, the same month with the same moon in the crescent shape when Ravana met Shiva here. Rakshastal is said to have a close resemblance to the moon. The desolation of the lake is often compared to the emptiness of the moon. Mansarovar remains tranquil and undisturbed forever, whereas the much smaller, crescent-shaped Rakshastal is always turbulent, irrespective of the weather. While Mansarovar exudes an inviting aura and bounteously gives away its water for bathing and drinking, no one even dares to come near the adjoining Rakshastal. They are scared by its tempestuous appearance. Even touching the water of the Rakshastal is strictly prohibited.’

Nagendra took off all his clothes and started walking naked into the freezing water alone. With half his body submerged in Rakshastal, he turned and ordered Parimal to get ready. Parimal opened the bag he had with him and took out a diver’s suit. Nagendra started praying as Parimal wore the suit. LSD opened her bag and gave him two underwater bombs before he entered the forbidden water. Nagendra instructed him further.

‘Mansarovar and Rakshastal are divided by the thin neck of mountains here. This neck has been distinguishing the names and natures of these waters for centuries, but not any more. Go and search for the weakest link underwater and break it. You have three hours at most. The search of the first word can start only after your work is over. We have to get the word tonight before the moon sets. There is no second chance and so there is absolutely no margin for error. Three hours it is! See you on the other side.’

Parimal followed the order and strapped on his oxygen mask. Before he plunged in, he turned to look at LSD and then dived in expressionlessly. Nagendra stepped out of the water and walked to LSD holding his clothes. He got dressed and walked back with LSD behind him. She was keeping track of Parimal on a monitor that she held in her hand. A glowing dot denoted Parimal's movements and exact location.

Deep in the dark waters, Parimal found the weakest spot and started digging the tunnel with an advanced and powerful earth auger. He dug nearly 20 feet in approximately two hours and found a natural cavity in the waterbed where he could plant one of the bombs, whose blast would create a massive impact. He fixed the bomb and swam back with the detonator in his hand, maintaining a safe distance.

While Nagendra meditated on the placid shore of Mansarovar, waiting for Parimal, LSD's heart was racing with every passing moment, her eyes fixed on the monitor. It indicated the giant wall between Mansarovar and Rakshastal and Parimal's position in the water near it. Nagendra continued to meditate with closed eyes. Suddenly, they felt the earth under them tremble. LSD grew tense but Nagendra opened his eyes and stood up, beaming at Mansarovar, expecting to see Parimal any moment. But LSD's monitor displayed something else.

Parimal dove back into the water and swam to the location of the blast to check if the work was done. It was not. The wall between the lakes had sustained the blast. He checked his watch and knew that time was running out. He touched the wall and with his wave scale, measured the thickness which was yet to be penetrated. The remaining thickness was greater than that of the recently destroyed wall! He immediately pulled out the second bomb, planted it at the deepest point of the newly formed hole and detonated it.

LSD and Nagendra felt another quake. This tremor was just a little stronger than the last one. The tension plastered on LSD's face was now visible on Nagendra's forehead too.

Three hours were almost up. Nagendra's eyes went to and fro between the moon and Mansarovar, which was still unruffled, and there was no sign of Parimal resurfacing. He was still in Rakshastal because even the second bomb had failed to destroy the wall entirely. Now it was just Parimal and his tools under water. Without wasting any time, Parimal started digging

further to break the final layer, which seemed like a never-ending task. His oxygen supply was getting exhausted rapidly and so was he.

Nagendra signalled to LSD. She took out another detonator and her diving suit but realized that Parimal was running out of time. She simply ran into Mansarovar and dove in without the suit, clasping the bomb and the detonator. Following the monitor's signal, which indicated Parimal's exact location and depth, LSD was right in line with Parimal, who was on the opposite side of the wall. She was out of breath and started choking, but continued fixing the bomb and finally pressed the detonator. But in her haste, she could not distance herself from the explosive. It exploded; the impact hurled LSD into the depths of the lake. Being right at the mouth of it, Parimal came flowing in with the first vicious wave of Rakshastal into Mansarovar and saw LSD unconscious and drowning. He desperately treaded the water, inched closer to her and caught her sinking figure. The wall had finally collapsed and the waves of the fierce Rakshastal started destroying the silence of the serene Mansarovar forever. The lake that was once as calm as the gliding moon had now transformed into an intense lake filled with lashing cacophony. Nagendra became the first man to witness Mansarovar losing its revered existence and dissolving completely into the high waves of Rakshastal for the rest of earth's life. If it is to be believed that Mansarovar and Rakshastal were the symbols of good and evil respectively, then that night, the evil had indisputably defeated the good mercilessly.

In a few minutes, Parimal emerged from the water, dragging LSD by her left hand to the shore, her body as limp as a corpse. He laid her down and immediately gave her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Nagendra rushed to find Parimal performing CPR on LSD. LSD gasped loudly as she came back to life. Nagendra pulled Parimal away from her, handed him another set of oxygen cylinders and showed him the crescent moon that was rapidly descending, ordering him to quickly get back in the water with him. Parimal saw the sinking moon and knew that he had to follow Nagendra's command, so he left LSD on the rocks of the shore.

When LSD opened her eyes, she saw Parimal and Nagendra entering and then disappearing into the giant waves of Mansarovar. To her, it felt as if Mansarovar were fighting its lost battle of existence with its last breaths of peace.

The luminous crescent moon was directly above them, shining at its brightest, as if conveying the occurrence of something extraordinary. They swam into the depths of the water, where Nagendra gestured to Parimal to turn his palm towards the moonlight, and warned him that his hand should remain absolutely steady.

As Parimal followed the instructions, he felt an unbearable pain as soon as the rays touched his palm, turning it red like an almost molten iron rod. He writhed in agony and could barely control his scream, but managed to keep his hand still until a part of his palm actually melted. The light penetrated and bore a hole through his hand. The scattered moonlight above his palm changed into a concentrated beam of light. The light refracted and fell at a distant spot to their right.

Nagendra followed the beam to the base of the lake and there, he finally found what had brought him there. Bright blue flames were dancing slightly above the seabed. He swam closer to the flame and spotted the glowing letters of the word that he had been searching for all this while. The word read 'अविनासी' (Avinasi). As Nagendra touched the glowing word, the letters disintegrated and turned into fireflies. They resembled the bursting sparks of fireworks against a dark sky. Nagendra gazed at this astonishing phenomenon underwater. The sparkling fireflies then entered Nagendra's body and he fainted. Parimal picked him up and returned to the shore, where LSD stood waiting. They each thanked the other for saving their life. As LSD discovered the wound in Parimal's palm, Parimal also noticed that the hand with which Nagendra had touched the word was shining like frost in the moonlight, as if all the fireflies he had seen in the deep, silent water had been trapped inside his hand. It was an implication that Nagendra had consumed the word 'Avinasi', which meant 'indestructible'.

Nagendra opened his eyes and saw that the moon had set. The sky was now speckled by the stars alone. He had succeeded in his very first hunt. LSD and Parimal stood right by his side while Rakshastal roared with the sound of waves crashing on the shore of the dead Mansarovar, as if applauding for Nagendra. He stood up slowly and saw Parimal's ferociously burnt palm.

'Butterflies can see a range of ultraviolet colours invisible to the human eye,' said Nagendra as he placed his glowing hand on Parimal's palm. As he did that, the hole started filling up and was partially healed. 'LSD! Clean

and cover the recovering wound, it will be fine in a few days,' Nagendra instructed.

He then went towards one of the two tents put up for the night. LSD and Parimal stood there, awaiting their next set of orders.

Right before entering his tent, Nagendra said, 'LSD, as you're ovulating tonight, it is the perfect time to fertilize your egg. I want Parimal's child from you in the month of कार्तिक (Kartik); you have nine months. Tomorrow, we leave before sunrise. We have more words to hunt for before LSD's child is born.' Nagendra took a swig of water from his round metal bottle as he went in, leaving LSD and Parimal standing there stupefied. Now they knew why Nagendra had ordered them to set up only two tents.

LSD broke the silence and said, 'Hi! We have not been introduced properly. Though I cannot tell you my name yet, you deserve to know that LSD is not the real one. So, what's your story?'

Parimal shrugged, 'I don't feel that way about you.'

'Neither do I,' LSD smiled amicably before continuing, 'He has asked us to produce a child, and thankfully, falling in love is not a part of the natural procedure of getting pregnant.'

The thundering wind and screaming waves continued tormenting the hushed silence of the night as they entered the tent.

Chapter 5

The Scion of Serpents

At around five in the morning, Om heard a ruckus outside his hut and woke up with a jolt. He saw all the sages rushing towards something and spotted Vrishkapi and Milarepa in the crowd. He put on his robe hastily and caught up with them.

‘Where is everyone running to?’ he asked Milarepa.

‘I’m not sure, but something terrible has happened.’ Om saw Milarepa sweating despite the nip in the wind.

He soon realized that they were headed to the southern edge of the mountain, where he could vaguely spot the backs of Ashwatthama and Parashurama. The distant sound of waves grew louder with each step Om took.

‘What has happened? Where is this noise coming from?’ Om asked as soon as he reached.

Parashurama stood silent. It was evident in his eyes that even though he stood still, his thoughts were as turbulent as the harsh waves in front of them. Ashwatthama spoke in his stead. ‘Someone has destroyed Mansarovar.’

Milarepa was perplexed. ‘Destroyed? What do you mean? Mansarovar is not a . . . pot of water! It is a water body! With a surface area of, like, 400 square km!’ No one responded. A crowd had gathered at the cliff by then, all the sages looking solemn and distressed. Everyone stood motionless, as if observing silence for the death of a loved one.

With sunrise drawing closer and the sky glowing brighter with each passing moment, everyone finally saw the catastrophe from the top of Kailash. An even bigger lake was now visible where Mansarovar had once been. The lake that had originated from Brahma’s conception was now consumed by the Ravana lake.

‘It is not about the size of the pot, but what is preserved within,’ Parashurama spoke. ‘The soul of the lake has been abducted. What is a

body without a soul? It is no more a water body; it is a dead body,' he declared grimly and suddenly walked away.

Om watched as Parashurama stumbled away on an unknown path. 'Who did this? What is happening? And where is Parashurama going at such a time?' He was completely staggered by this disastrous development.

Ashwatthama's eyes were also fixed on the departing Parashurama. 'He is going to bring the man who might have the answers to our questions. There is only one man, after Dhanvantari, who has all the answers. He has been in deep penance in a hidden cave in Amarnath for the past 5400 years, and Parashurama is now going to wake him up.'

'Who?' asked Om, wondering.

'What matters right now is your training. We will be speeding that up,' replied Ashwatthama.

Om had several questions looming in his consciousness, but before he could get entangled in that mesh, Vrishkapi attacked him. Taken aback, Om tried to defend himself, but he was way off guard to counter his attacks; the impact shoved Om to the ground. Wondering why Ashwatthama was not helping him, he got back on his feet and saw that Ashwatthama stood silently, waiting for his next move as Vrishkapi charged at Om again. The sun was up and Om realized that his training for the day had already begun, without warning, and he was in the middle of a combat with the last of the surviving beings from Hanuman's clan who was much stronger than a sabretooth.

Parashurama stood on the shore of Mansarovar. He found the empty oxygen cylinders, food packets, tent anchors and other stuff like matchboxes, but no man in sight to claim them. While Parashurama stood there, wondering who it could have been, Parimal was leading the way to the west of Mansarovar holding another piece of the same torn map which Nagendra had given him, and which highlighted their next destination. Nagendra followed closely behind him while LSD trailed behind both.

While these two sides were playing their own roles, no one knew what Dr Batra was busy with. This was less a statement and more an indication from Prithvi to Mrs Batra to narrate Dr Batra's tale of progress and failure.

After two more days, Dr Batra went to check on the guinea pig again. 'It had been a week and he was expecting to see Pooh completely recovered. But upon entering the lab, he found that it was lying unconscious under the table. He held it up to examine it, and it was clear that these weren't signs

of recovery but of death. And then, right there in Tej's hand, Pooh passed away,' Mrs Batra recounted.

'*This can't be*, Tej thought as his mind started racing. It was getting better; the symptoms had reduced; it had not been struggling in pain. His experiment had come so close to finding a cure to save his wife, but was it all in vain? It couldn't be!

'He held Pooh's corpse in his hands. He was so devastated, he broke down completely. Tej was a scientific man who had dedicated his whole life to the field of medicine, and who had initially refused to believe Om's "stories" but had put his faith in them nonetheless; he believed it all, only to lose at the end. He was angry with himself, angry at the circumstances, angry that he wouldn't be able to save me. Heavy sobs of fury and frustration ripped through him. He had truly hit rock bottom.

'He returned upstairs to see me squirming in pain. The pain was impossible to bear despite all the injections and painkillers. But the magnitude of Tej's pain was much greater than mine because he was experiencing the pain of helplessness. I could see it on his face.

'"Tej, I can't take this any more. You must let me go!" I muttered as he clutched my hand firmly. Tej couldn't contain his sorrow. Tears flooded from his eyes as he turned and left the room.

'He sat silently in the basement for a few minutes, composed himself and rose resolutely. He opened the freezer where Om's blood sample had been stored. He took all of the remaining blood in a syringe, came to the bedroom and pampered me as his lips curved into a wistful smile.

'"Please Tej, relieve me of this pain. Let me die, please."

'He took out two sleeping pills and brought a glass of water. He propped me up on the pillow carefully and handed them to me. As I gulped them down, Tej smiled through his tears and squeezed my hand. I lay down again and saw his figure fading. The last thing I remember is smiling feebly at him. I knew that Tej also couldn't bear to see me suffer any longer and that he was really releasing me. After I fell asleep, he injected me with Om's blood. The quantity was enough to at least give me a painless death as observed in the guinea pig, if nothing else. He sat by my side as I transcended into another world. The beeping of the machines halted as the heart monitor flatlined. Tej, having stayed awake by my side for days, fell asleep out of exhaustion right beside me.'

Back in Prithvi's narrative, Parashurama was en route to the town of Pahalgam to visit the Hindu shrine of Amarnath, which was 683 km to the north-west of Mansarovar. Meanwhile, Nagendra went into hiding in the south-west, with his next destination 173 km away.

'Now that we have acquired the first word successfully and Mansarovar is destroyed forever, the journey to the extraction of the next word from here will be riskier as they will be on the alert now. We must be more cautious from now on as they will already be on the prowl for us; if not, they will begin soon. Our next destination is close,' said Nagendra, and passed a slip to LSD. 'Shhh!' The gesture Nagendra made was enough for Parimal and LSD to understand that nothing should be enunciated aloud. The slip showed the attributes of a mysterious lake. 'The time isn't right yet. We have to reach this place on the night of the next crescent moon. We must remain out of sight till then,' concluded Nagendra.

In the north, Parashurama had reached Amarnath. The Amarnath pilgrimage was open to devotees only between the months of May and August, because only during that period did the Shiva linga made of ice appear in the cave. It was mid-February, so there was no one around and the place was absolutely quiet. He entered and continued to tread past the main area till he reached the last accessible corner inside the cave. The walls there were bumpy, with asymmetrical crevices. In that corner was an inconspicuous bulge in the rocks. Parashurama felt the rough surface with his palms until he found a particular spot. He summoned his *parashu* and the axe appeared and hammered the rock lightly with its butt. A few chunks fell out and revealed a closed eye. He started digging around it with his hand, clearing the rocks until a meditating figure was revealed.

It was the man he had come in search of, sitting in silence with his eyes closed. Over all the centuries that he'd sat there, he had become a part of the cave, completely unified with nature. His body was mostly skeletal, his thin skin speckled with tiny insects and worms that lived there. His hair was caked with mud and dirt along with the rest of his face.

Parashurama awoke him from his deep *samadhi* (trance) and the man opened his eyes. He looked at Parashurama and realized that it must be something urgent because Parashurama himself was standing in front of him. He silently waited for his visitor to speak.

'Mansarovar has been defeated by Rakshastal. The soul of Mansarovar is missing. We have also lost the books of Mrit Sanjeevani,' said

Parashurama.

While Parashurama continued to brief the old man about the situation in Kailash, Nagendra and his team arrived at a remote hotel, where they checked into a small room to get some rest. While the others settled in, LSD researched the mystery lake. She learnt that Roopkund was a high-altitude glacial lake, surrounded by rock-strewn glaciers and snow-clad mountains and was widely known for the hundreds of ancient human skeletons found at its edge, contributing to the lake being called Skeleton Lake in recent times. These carcasses are still visible in the clear water of the shallow lake but for only a month, when the ice melts. Along with the discovery of skeletons, wooden artifacts, iron spearheads, leather slippers and rings were also unearthed. Radiocarbon dating had determined that the remains were from a distant point down south. All relics of South Asian ancestry were dated back to the Satya yuga. The studies of the skeletons revealed a common cause of death: blunt force trauma to the back of the head. In a study published in August 2019, the examination of DNA extracted from thirty-eight skeletons deduced that populations experienced mortal incidents at the lake aeons back.

Just then, Nagendra took out his worn-out metal bottle and drank from it. The faded colour made it appear old, but the light dancing around its curved edges made it shine as good as new. *He had been carrying that around in Mansarovar with the other camping equipment*, recalled LSD.

‘I have to go back to my chamber in the submarine and deposit our extraction from Mansarovar. I will be back in a few days. Meanwhile, you both stay here and be vigilant,’ he stuffed his bottle back into his bag and left for the submarine.

Vrishkapi continued striking Om while Ashwatthama dispensed a series of instructions from afar on how to defend himself, but Om couldn’t keep up and continued absorbing the brutal blows. A frustrated Ashwatthama stopped Vrishkapi and marched towards Om.

‘Why are you not following my instructions? Where is your concentration? We don’t have time, Om.’

‘And I thought that we were the only handful of men who had time,’ Om groaned, panting for air.

Om’s smug response annoyed Ashwatthama. ‘You do not understand. I have to—’

‘You are right! So help me understand. Give me the answers. Tell me clearly what is going on. There are a hundred questions hampering my attention, questions more pressing than this illogical training Parashurama has asked you to put me through.’

Ashwatthama signalled that Vrishkapi leave. Vrishkapi bowed his head to Ashwatthama, gave a friendly smile to Om and left.

Considering what Om was going through, Ashwatthama calmed himself down and spoke politely. ‘All right. Come, sit. Tell me, what’s bothering you?’

Om took a deep breath, apologized to Ashwatthama for his behaviour and sat beside him.

Om opened with, ‘What is going on here?’ Ashwatthama gathered himself before answering and said, ‘I don’t know as much as Parashurama, but I do know that Mrit Sanjeevani was stolen from you and it wasn’t done for the process of immortality.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The man who has the answers to many of your questions, if not all, must be on his way here with Parashurama. I promise that I will make sure you get all the answers that he has, but until then, my friend, please cooperate with me and please focus on your training. We are already running short of time and every minute wasted can amount to the loss of uncountable lives as well as our defeat. Can we please start again?’

Om nodded quietly.

‘Come with me.’ Ashwatthama stood up and began to walk.

Time crawled as LSD and Parimal stayed cooped up in their small hotel room at a location midway between the two lakes of Mansarovar and Roopkund. One morning, Parimal clenched his fist and felt no pain, so he decided to uncover the bandage wrapped around his palm. LSD came close and noticed the scar left behind by the healed wound. The mark resembled an unusual iris with a vertically elongated pupil inside.

She grasped his hand to take a better look and peering at it from different angles, she remarked, ‘You know, this mark on your hand looks like a kind of eye deformity called coloboma. It’s derived from a Greek word meaning ‘defect’. Medical literature typically describes it as a keyhole-shaped defect. It’s rare and occurs in less than one in 10,000 births. Apart from humans, this abnormality is also found in cats but for some snakes, it is a normal phenomenon. There is a specific breed called vine snakes. Vine snakes have

this keyhole-shaped pupil that helps them focus and provides better binocular vision as compared to other snake species. They have enlarged, grooved teeth at the back of their mouths but they are not as poisonous as cobras, yet poisonous enough to subdue their prey.'

'How do you know all of this?' Parimal was amazed listening to her talk about it in such detail.

LSD was thrown off by his question. She fidgeted with her hands and looked away as she replied, 'Uh . . . I was once supposed to prepare a . . . a project report on snakes, in my childhood, although I personally don't like snakes. Coincidently, this scar resembles the eyes of vine snakes . . . so I remembered.'

Parimal could sense that she was hiding something. 'You know you can tell me why you are here. Why are you working for Nagendra?'

'And why should I tell *you* that?'

'Look, we are working towards Nagendra's goal together. We have slept with each other . . . no matter how awkward it was in the beginning. There's a good chance you may have conceived my child, which will belong to us equally. This association seems to have transformed into a lifelong relationship already. We have time to strengthen it. We have to learn to trust each other and for that, we must know each other better,' Parimal reasoned.

LSD remained mum. Parimal sighed. *The only way to get her to open up would be to share my own story*, Parimal thought and so, he continued. He looked at LSD and admitted, 'You are right about the scar, it is not a coincidence. Vine snakes, found in the Indian subcontinent, do have keyhole-shaped pupils. This mark does have a reason, though. I had an eyeball with a keyhole-shaped pupil grouted on my palm when I was born.'

'That is . . . weird. You came out of the womb with closed fists and when you uncurled your hand, people found you holding an eyeball?' LSD grimaced in surprise and confusion.

'Firstly, I wasn't born surrounded by doctors and nurses the way you're assuming. I was born with open fists, only in front of my father, while Nagendra waited outside the room to confirm that I indeed had the same eyeball on my palm. Every child born in our family is born with open fists and an iris with the keyhole-shaped pupil embedded within the palm, exactly the way eyes exist inside the eye socket. However, these eyeballs are connected to our veins and draw our blood to grow rapidly till they pop out of our hand. But these are not made up of tissues and cells, so don't

imagine them moving inside the palm and seeing things around. Within days, the eyeball matures and falls out, leaving behind a scar that heals over time and finally vanishes as the dead skin sheds over the years,' Parimal explained.

'So you shed skin too! And what happens to that eyeball?' asked LSD suspiciously.

With a smile, Parimal replied, 'Yes, I shed skin too, but not like snakes, as you are probably imagining. And also, the eyeball naturally disintegrates into sand particles after exactly nine days of popping out of the palm.'

'Then why is it there? What purpose does it serve?' was the next question from LSD.

'I don't know,' answered Parimal, as if trying to close the topic.

'What? So this has been happening for generations and no one has figured it out?' LSD frowned in disappointment while Parimal smirked at her. She saw Parimal's expression and thought that he was bluffing.

'You're just making this up, right? This is simply a story that you cooked up right now when I said that the scar in your palm looked like an eye,' she glared at him.

'No, I am not cooking up anything.' Parimal's words were genuine, but LSD had made up her mind already on her belief that Parimal was lying.

'It's pretty incredible; I do not believe you.'

Parimal stood there, wondering where to begin, while LSD narrowed her eyes at his face.

'Maybe this will help. You see, you haven't noticed one thing yet, LSD . . . I have no palm lines.'

Stunned, LSD scrutinized both his palms and realized that he really did not have any lines, not even on the hand without the scar.

'I don't have any palm lines because I don't have a destiny. I was not making it up. I really don't know what purpose the eyeball serves and why it destroys itself after nine days. But I want you to know that I'm telling the truth and that you can trust me.'

LSD still looked unconvinced and couldn't meet his eyes.

'So . . . why are you here?' asked LSD.

'Because I have been ordered to,' replied Parimal with a vague understanding of what she meant to learn about him. She reframed her question. 'What has he promised you for all of this?'

'Nothing!' He averted his gaze.

LSD did not believe him and dug deeper with a gentler tone. ‘Then why are you serving him, Parimal?’

‘I am the outcome of the amalgamation of a boon and a curse. What I mean will require some explanation. Have you ever heard of Kadru?’

LSD wore a blank expression.

‘Seer Kashyap? Aghasur? Ashtavakra?’ Parimal listed a few other names from the tale to see if any of those rang a bell. ‘Well, if I’m reading your face right, that’s definitely a *no*.’ He understood that to explain his connection with Nagendra, he would have to take her to the very beginning.

‘My full name is Parimal Nair and I am a Nagavanshi. Like Chandravanshis[*] are descendants of the moon, Suryavanshis[*] of the sun and Agnivanshis of Agni[†], Nagavanshis belong to one of the many principal houses of the warrior–ruling class who descend from snakes. I am sorry that you don’t like snakes, but I am originally a snake inside this human body, LSD. Nagavanshis are known to be a snake-worshipping tribe of ancient India. The primary deity of the Nairs is Goddess Bhagavati, who is the patron goddess of war and fertility. The serpent is worshipped by Nair families as a guardian of the clan because we are believed to be a part of Kadru’s family tree and all snakes in the world are considered to be her children.

‘All of this started back in Satya yuga, when a seer named Kashyap married one of the granddaughters of Lord Brahma, named Kadru. For years, Kadru lived as the seer’s wife and tended to all his comforts. Happy with her devotion towards her duties, one day, Kashyap blessed her with a boon of her choice. Kadru asked for a thousand serpent children who would be courageous. Kashyap granted the wish and Kadru became pregnant. After a long time, Kadru gave birth to one thousand eggs. The eggs were carefully incubated in jars with hot water, which kept them warm. After five hundred years, Kadru’s eggs hatched and her sons came to life. The descendants of these sons are called Nagavanshis. Now you must be wondering how Nagendra fits into this picture.’ Parimal waited for LSD’s reaction. She just gave a slight nod.

‘Nagendra owns my family’s ancestry. My entire lineage owes its loyalty to Nagendra. Our loyalty towards him is the price we pay for our vision and our service to him is in exchange for a complete human body, to be able to live on land as humans do.’ Parimal looked at LSD, who still seemed confused, so he went into the details.

‘I am the proof of an old and famous tale of Dwapara yuga, from Lord Krishna’s childhood. I come from the lineage of Aghasur. In Satya yuga, Aghasur, a demon, came across a seer named Ashtavakra, whose body was malformed in eight places, because of which he appeared extremely ugly and walked in a zigzag pattern. Aghasur made the mistake of laughing at the handicapped seer and ridiculed him for his looks and gait. Insulted, Ashtavakra cursed Aghasur to turn into one of the ugliest serpents, as they can only crawl in a zigzag pattern. Frightened by the curse, Aghasur fell at the seer’s feet and begged for forgiveness. Ashtavakra’s wrath subsided but he couldn’t revoke his curse, so he told Aghasur that at the end of Dwapara yuga, Lord Vishnu’s incarnation would liberate him of this bane by killing his serpent body and ridding him of all his sins.

‘Aghasur waited for thousands of years as a serpent for the reincarnation of Vishnu and in the meantime, became one of King Kansa’s trusted generals. Kansa, who wanted to kill Krishna, was the brother of Krishna’s mother, Devki. He made many attempts on Krishna’s life, beginning at Krishna’s birth, but failed. In those attempts, two of Aghasur’s siblings, Putana and Bakasur, lost their lives at the hands of the child. Kansa then ordered Aghasur to kill his nephew, who was also the reason for Putana and Bakasur’s deaths. Unaware of the fact that the boy he was sent to kill was the very incarnation of Vishnu, he took the form of an 8 mile-long serpent, camouflaging his open mouth with a mountain to swallow Krishna when he would step in. Instead of Krishna, all his cowherd friends entered Aghasur’s mouth, mistaking it for a cavern. To save them, Krishna entered the serpent’s mouth too and then enlarged the size of his own body. As a counterattack, the demon too extended his size until he couldn’t breathe any more. Suppressed by Krishna’s strength, the demon’s life force could not pass through any outlet, and therefore, it finally burst out through Aghasur’s eye sockets. His keyhole-shaped eyes rolled about frantically and then popped out. Thus, the demon-serpent met his end through Krishna, and Ashtavakra’s curse was lifted.

‘But when he had set out to kill Krishna, he had left his pregnant serpentine wife, Sarputi, in Paatal city. After Aghasur’s death, his wife gave birth to a son named Lopaksh, who was half serpent-half human. Because Aghasur’s eyes had popped out before his son’s birth, Lopaksh was born blind, with plain skin in place of the eye sockets. Lopaksh, the child who was neither a snake nor a human, was cast out by the city of Paatal. Sarputi

left Paatal with her infant in search of someone who had the ability to cure her blind child. Years passed as Lopaksh grew old and Sarputi grew older, hiding and wandering on land with her sightless half man-half snake son, looking for a remedy, till she finally met a man with immense supernatural powers who could grant any boon and treat any illness by mere chanting. The man was sitting near a lake beside a black lion flaunting a shiny and rich black mane. The lion sat up majestically, enough to scare away the best of beasts. But when the man caressed the back of the lion, it purred softly like a cat being stroked by its master. The man called it Kaalo banthan, as it was really his pet!'

LSD interrupted in realization, 'You are the successor of Lopaksh. I know about him. The man Sarputi met was Nagendra himself, who was seeking the stolen Mrit Sanjeevani created by the demi-god Dhanvantari. By the time Sarputi met him, her desperation was so intense that she was ready to pay any price. Nagendra said that he could give the boy both, the vision and the complete body of a human, after which he would never have to return to his serpent form and could live on land, but in return, Sarputi would give him an oath which would have to be honoured by all her successors. If anyone ever tried to break this oath, then the complete lineage would be doomed.

'For the well-being of her son, the desperate serpentine mother gave consent without even asking what the oath was. Nagendra used his powers and the blind Lopaksh saw his mother for the first time at the ripe age of thirty-two. Indebted to Nagendra, Lopaksh touched his feet and thanked him for the favour.' Suddenly, LSD became conscious of her rambling and stopped.

'How did you know all of this?' Parimal was amused.

'Well, actually, Nagendra used to tell me this as a bedtime story,' LSD replied and then fell silent again.

'It was not a favour but a barter,' Parimal continued. 'Nagendra reminded Sarputi of her promise and told Lopaksh that now, his mother would take the oath and all her successors, including him, would keep it.'

'What was the oath?' asked LSD curiously, and Parimal disappointedly replied, 'The oath is what connects me to Nagendra till date. Sarputi came forward and said, "O seer! I am ready to take the oath and abide by it, so will my son Lopaksh and his successors after that. Tell me what we must do to return the favour." Lopaksh stood by his mother and watched silently.

‘Nagendra said, “First of all, Sarputi, you will never be able to return this favour because I will never let you. You worship the patron goddess of war and fertility, Goddess Bhagavati. From now onwards, you will worship her only for war, as Lopaksh and every adult after him will have only one child, after which they will lose their fertility forever. Every child will serve me selflessly, without any choice, till death, and only I shall hold the authority to free them from this oath. If any one of your successors even thinks of breaching this vow, they shall see in their dreams that their predecessors have been cast out from heaven and the living have returned to their original form of half-serpents with no vision. As a warning, in their dreams, they will be forced to go back to the pits of the earth or die without an heir, thus destroying the lineage and making all their past sacrifices futile. All of this shall become their reality if the one warned by their dreams still chooses to betray me. Your vision and your human body are the rewards you get for serving me, which may be retracted whenever you cease to serve.” Thus, every time a successor takes over the oath, it relieves the ancestors forever, transforming them into a blind old snake for the remainder of their lives.’

‘How can you be certain that the oath is binding and that it’s not just an anecdote passed down through the generations?’

‘Because I have seen a man losing his eyesight and turning into a snake before I cremated him. It was my father,’ Parimal retorted. ‘We are transformed into snakes when he relieves us, passing the same oath to the next in our clan. I have seen my father turning into a blind snake when I undertook the oath. That was the fate of all my ancestors and it will be mine as well as of our child. We come with open fists, no palm lines, no destiny, and leave the world without hands, in the very form that we evade all our lives. Now you know why we don’t have lines on our palms—because we have not been created by gods and we never deserved hands.’

‘And the dream? What about the dream? Did you see it too?’ LSD’s curiosity was piqued.

‘No! I have seen enough to not think about betraying my lord in my wildest dreams.’ Parimal shook his head angrily. ‘Now, what’s your story?’ he finally asked LSD.

Before he could question her further, LSD raised a finger, signalling him to be quiet as she heard footsteps approaching their hotel room.

They straightened in alarm and retrieved their 92 FS Beretta handguns. Nagendra was back. He entered to find them on guard and ordered them, ‘Pack your bags. We are leaving now.’

He had returned sooner than they had estimated and Parimal’s question to LSD remained unanswered. They also wondered why they were leaving so early, because the next crescent moon was still days away, but neither had the audacity to raise the query. They knew that they would get their answers when the time was right. Soon, their bags were packed and LSD was about to swing hers on her back when Nagendra approached her, handing her a pregnancy test kit in front of Parimal. It was obvious what Nagendra wanted to know, so she took it and went to the washroom. Parimal silently observed the orders being followed. Nagendra gestured to Parimal to carry LSD’s bag too and walk out with him. In a few minutes, LSD joined them and took her bag back from Parimal, looked at Nagendra and nonchalantly uttered, ‘I am pregnant.’

In no time, they were marching towards their next destination in search of the second word.

Chapter 6

Nine

Upon a rock were placed multiple arrows with varied heads. The leftmost was zigzag in shape, the one beside it looked like molten metal, the third in line had a droplet-shaped transparent head while the fourth head looked like a beak. Another beautiful metal arrow had numerous weapons intricately carved all over it.

Om stood in front of the assortment as Ashwatthama explained the powers of the divine arrows. Lifting the arrow with the molten metal head, he said, ‘The other day you learnt about Vayuastra, which had the potential to create hurricanes vicious enough to blow away an army. Now, the one I’m holding is called Agneyastra. When shot at the target, it emits flames which are inextinguishable by normal means. The Agneyastra is the divine weapon of Agni. It can melt anything. It is so formidable that it can wipe out every trace of the enemy from the face of the earth. It can not only burn an entire army but can also melt guns, tanks, missiles and flying jets if aimed and chanted upon rightly. The volume of fire, the intensity of heat and the potency of the flames depends on the powers yielded by the person, their concentration and chanting prowess.’

Ashwatthama then picked up another arrow that was zigzag in shape with a snake head at its tip. ‘This is Naagpasha. As its appearance and name suggest, this weapon grants you the power to invoke snakes to attack your enemies. Upon impact, this weapon binds the target in coils of venomous snakes which tighten their grip till the foe’s bones are crushed and there remains no breath of life left in them. In the age of the Ramayana, it was used against Ram and Lakshman by Indrajit, the son of the demon king Ravana.’

Next was the one that had several other weapons carved on its body. ‘This is Narayanastra. On the sixteenth day of the war of Kurukshetra, I was the one to propel it with the intent to kill the Pandavas, but Lord Krishna’s advice saved them from a definite death. This weapon belongs to Narayana (Vishnu). It is an inimitable celestial weapon because when fired, it

simultaneously launches a thunderous outburst of millions of deadly weapons like *chakra*, mace and ultra-sharp arrows that wreak absolute destruction and overpower the target. Whoever tries to resist it is inevitably destroyed as the intensity of the showering armaments increases with resistance. It is destructive enough to slay anyone or anything. No obstruction is capable of hindering its strike and that's why it can't be countered by another weapon. When I shot this at the Pandavas, they didn't know that the only way to stop it is through total surrender, but it was Lord Krishna who advised them to lay down their weapons and submit completely to the Narayanastra.'

Then Ashwatthama gripped the arrow with a transparent water droplet on its tip. 'This is Varunastra. This one is commonly used to counter the Agneyastra. Launching this arrow would release torrential volumes of water.' Moving on to the arrow with a beak shape at its tip, Ashwatthama added, 'And this one is Garudastra, a weapon that can defend against Naagpasha and Nagastra. Garuda is a bird-like creature that is the serpent's predator. Ever vigilant and agile, Garuda is the steed of Lord Vishnu. When the Garudastra is released from the bow, it unleashes a hefty flock of these creatures to attack the venomous snakes of Naagpasha and Nagastra.'

Before Ashwatthama could pick up another weapon, Om saw Parashurama approaching them. Walking beside him was the sage that he had gone to Amarnath to awaken. Ashwatthama turned to see what had grabbed Om's attention. Seeing Parashurama and the sage, Ashwatthama bowed.

'Blessing you with *ayushmaan bhavah* (a long life), Ashwatthama, would be no better than shining a torch at the sun,' said the sage and instead, blessed him with, '*Vijayi bhavah* (May you be victorious)!'

Following Ashwatthama, Om also bowed to the sage, who didn't need to be introduced, for the two had a connection from aeons ago. The man standing in front of Om was none other than Ved Vyasa. During the age of the Mahabharata, upon his request, Om had acted as a stand-in for his son Vidur. Ved Vyasa had wanted to keep at least one of his sons safe and away from the war and thus had replaced him with Om on the frontline. No one knew what the real Vidur looked like as he was not raised in the kingdom with the rest of his brothers and hence, it was easy to make the switch. As sage Vyasa locked eyes with Om, an unspoken understanding passed between them. Vyasa gave him a slight nod, as if thanking him for his role

in the past, as Om vanished after the war and Ved Vyasa never wrote the end of Vidur that made his end questionable.

‘It is great to have you here, Om.’ Om had no idea how to reciprocate or behave while meeting the third of the seven immortals after ages. Before he could say anything, Parashurama spoke. ‘Sage Vyasa! As you wanted, here stand all three of us together. Please explain—why has Mansarovar been destroyed?’

Sage Vyasa shared a sombre look with the three men in front of him. ‘The destruction of Mansarovar is not a complete event, dear Parashurama. It is merely the beginning of a convoluted plan that is almost impossible to carry out.’

‘Plan! What plan? Whose plan?’ Ashwatthama spoke in agitation.

‘I can answer the *what* but I don’t know *whose*,’ replied Vyasa.

‘Maybe the answer to the *what* can lead us to the *who*,’ Om chimed in, unsure if he could even share his inputs.

‘Maybe,’ Vyasa reflected.

‘So, what is the impossible plan?’ asked Parashurama.

‘One of the oldest prophecies was declared in a verse that was intentionally hidden and over time, grew so old that we thought it was already lost forever from all Hindu scriptures, but Dhanvantari saved it. A verse that spelled, “In nine consecutive old moons, starting from the month of Magh, one shall succeed in extracting nine hidden words from nine mysterious locations, which would function as the key to a mysterious door.”’

‘O seer! Kindly enlighten us with the complete knowledge of what this means,’ said Ashwatthama with joined hands.

‘We will be weak in comparison to him because together, we are not nine in number, but eight. The number nine holds great significance in our world. Starting from the life of a foetus in the mother’s womb before birth, to the death of the human being, after which the family must calm and pacify the Navagraha (nine planets), everything revolves around the number nine.

‘The sum of the digits of every yuga, for some obscure reason, is nine. When calculated in human years, Satya yuga lasts for 14,40,000 years. Treta yuga is 10,80,000 years, Dwapara yuga is 7,20,000 years and Kali yuga is 3,60,000 human years. The individual sum of all the digits in each year is nine.

‘Hindus have eighteen Puranas, 108 Mahapuranas (Upanishads), the Mahabharat has eighteen chapters, the battle lasted eighteen days, the Gita has eighteen chapters and the Bhagavata Purana, 18,000 verses. The sum of all these digits again equals nine.

‘In the Vaisheshika branch of Hindu philosophy, there are nine universal substances or elements: earth, water, air, fire, sky, time, space, soul and mind.

‘We worship the Navagraha, the nine planets. We celebrate Navaratri, which is a nine-day festival dedicated to the nine forms of Durga—the Navadurga; each day is associated with the celebration of one of these incarnations.

‘Hindu astrology recognizes nine gems, called the Navaratna, meaning nine jewels, one to influence every planet: ruby for the sun, pearl for the moon, red coral for Mars, emerald for Mercury, yellow sapphire for Jupiter, diamond for Venus, blue sapphire for Saturn, hessonite for the ascending lunar node and cat’s eye for the descending lunar node.

‘In Hindu aesthetics, there are nine kinds of rasa. Rasa, meaning juice or essence, is a concept that offers nine different expressions to help describe the intangibility of emotions that can be evoked within the reader or audience through any visual, literary or musical work.

‘The fight between gods and demons for earth is as old as the earth itself and to deny the demons victory, Lord Vishnu has taken nine incarnations till date.

‘The Bhagavata Purana describes an infinite cycle of four great ages, from Satya yuga to Kali yuga, during which the principles of religion, dharma and virtue gradually deteriorate.

‘In the Satya yuga, dharma and virtue are innate. In Treta, they are sought and attained. In Dwapara, they are intensely provoked and agitated, and in Kali yuga, they perish. At the end of Kali yuga, the principles of religion, or the occupational duties of humanity, will dissipate entirely. Kali yuga began 5121 years ago, the sum of which again amounts to nine. It is meant to end in the year 4,28,899 CE, which means, as of 2020, it has 4,26,879 years remaining, the sum of which is also nine. But what makes the year 2020 particularly perilous in the fourth yuga is not the number nine but four, which is the sum of the digits of the year 2020 and also of the year 4,28,899 CE, the purported end of the last yuga. Someone is trying to advance this anticipated conclusion to 2020 to terminate the fourth yuga 4,26,879 years

early. Everything will end in this year if in nine old moons, starting from the month of माघ (January–February), one succeeds in extracting nine souls hidden in nine mysterious locations, which, once freed, would follow the ninth immortal against the remaining eight of us. I believe that "the lost text" was the hidden books of Mrit Sanjeevani and someone has figured out that every ninth page of the book has the route and the procedure to reach and extract the souls that are camouflaged as words. The compilation of all the words will form a verse. I believe that someone is trying to make this prophecy come true and liberate the demons through the integration of the words that are scattered and protected in mysterious places all over India.'

'So, where exactly is that door?' enquired Parashurama.

'No one knows that. But Parashurama, I can say with utmost certainty that the upcoming eight months are extremely crucial.

'There are twelve months in the Hindu lunar calendar. The nine old moons span nine months, with one old moon occurring every month. Calculating from Magh onwards, which begins in the second half of January, according to the Gregorian calendar, we have already lost one. The destruction of the pious lake of Mansarovar is a sign. We are now left with barely twelve days before the crescent moon of the next month, फाल्गुन (February–March), which begins in the second half of February. This will be followed by 252 days divided into eight more months of चैत्र (March–April), वैशाख (April–May), ज्येष्ठ (May–June), आषाढ़ (June–July), श्रावण (July–August), भाद्रपद (August–September), अश्विन (September–October) and कार्तिक (October–November).'

'Ashwatthama! Call Vrishkapi and Milarepa,' ordered Parashurama. Obeying the command, Ashwatthama left with Om immediately.

As they departed, Parashurama turned towards Vyasa. 'Where are these mysterious places protecting the words of the verse?'

'Right now, I can tell you about only three places,' replied Ved Vyasa. He also revealed that while Dhanvantari was dictating the books of Mrit Sanjeevani to Sushruta, he, Ved Vyasa, had heard them. 'The rest will have to be decoded further from the book. Moreover, the sequence written in the book is unknown to me,' the sage added.

'We will work something out for that too. First, we need to know the locations,' Parashurama mused.

On the other side, Ashwatthama and Om were headed back to the abode of Vrishkapi. While crossing the cave of light, Ashwatthama voiced his thoughts. ‘Nine! Never thought about nine the way Ved Vyasa explained it.’

Since Om was mulling over the same information, he added, ‘Yes! Perhaps the number nine is a mysterious number for mathematicians too. They are obsessed with nine because of its tricky, almost magical qualities. I wonder if all of this is connected.’

‘Mathematicians! How?’ Ashwatthama mused.

‘There are several reasons. To begin with, nine is the first composite lucky number, the first composite odd number and the only single-digit composite odd number. It is the only positive perfect power that is one more than another positive perfect power, according to Mihăilescu’s theorem.

‘Moreover, if you multiply nine by any whole number except zero, and repeatedly add the digits of the answer until it’s just one digit, you will end up with nine. For example, 2 multiplied by 9 is 18. 1 when added to 8 is 9. Take a bigger number, say, 5,78,329. When multiplied by nine, the answer is 52,04,961. And 5 + 2 + 0 + 4 + 9 + 6 + 1 is 27, and 2 + 7 is 9. Conversely, if the digits of a number add up to nine or a multiple of nine, then the number itself must be a multiple of nine.

‘If a number is divided by the amount of nines corresponding to its number of digits, the number turns into a repeating decimal. For example, 274 divided by 999 is equal to 0.274274274274.

‘Furthermore, the formula for determining the sum of the interior angles of a polygon is n-2(180), where n is the number of sides. The sum of all angles of any polygon will always equal 9. A nine-sided polygon is 9-2(180) or 7(180) or 1260. 1+2+6+0 = 9. This is true for a polygon with any number of sides.

‘The same applies to circles, triangles, rectangles, pentagons, hexagons and heptagons.

‘A full circle is 360 degrees—3+6+0 = 9.

‘A semicircle is 180 degrees—1+8+0 = 9.

‘A 90-degree circle—9+0 = 9.

‘A 45-degree circle—4+5 = 9.

‘A 22.5-degree circle—2+2+5 = 9.

‘For any angle in a circle, the resulting angle always reduces to 9.

‘For a 180-degree triangle, 1+8+0 = 9.

‘For a 360-degree rectangle, 3+6+0 = 9.

‘For a pentagon, 5+4+0 = 9.

‘For a hexagon, 7+2+0 = 9.

‘For a heptagon, 9+0+0 = 9.

‘Similarly, the diameter of the moon is 2160 miles, which again adds up to 9.

‘The diameter of the earth is 7920 miles, that adds up to 9: 7+9+2+0 = 18, 1+8 = 9.

‘The diameter of the sun is 8,64,000 miles, 8+6+4 = 18, 1+8 = 9.

‘Not only that, the speed of light is 1,86,282 mps, which means 1+8+6+2+8+2 = 27, 2+7 = 9.

‘It is believed that the number nine governs space and time too. It plays an important role in earth’s axis. For example, if minutes are calculated at different levels, the end is always nine.

‘5,25,600 minutes in a year: 5+2+5+6+0 = 18, 1+8 = 9.

‘4,32,000 minutes in a month: 4+3+2+0+0+0 = 9.

‘1,00,800 minutes in a week: 1+0+0+8+0+0 = 9.

‘1440 minutes in a day: 1+4+4+0 = 9.

‘There are other interesting patterns involving multiples of nine. For instance,

12345679 × 9 = 111111111
12345679 × 18 = 222222222
12345679 × 81 = 999999999

‘This works for all the multiples of nine. N = 3 is the only other n > 1 such that a number is divisible by n if and only if its digital root (sum of digits) is divisible by n. In base-N, the divisors of N − 1 have this property. Another consequence of 9 being 10 − 1 is that it is also a Kaprekar number.’

As Om finished explaining, Ashwatthama chuckled, ‘Some of it bounced right off my head, but it is interesting to know that the number nine holds such significance in mathematics too.’

Chapter 7

The Curse and the Cure

As Prithvi took a break, Mrs Batra intervened, saying, ‘I heard the news on television on my deathbed and it was the same month, the month of February. I remember when, after a deep slumber of six hours, Tej suddenly jolted awake, feeling utterly dazed. Out of exhaustion, he had fallen asleep right beside my bed in his chair. The sound of the monitor flatlining woke him. He sat up straight to check on me, and in a flash, everything hit him like a relentless tsunami. I was dead. The experiment had failed. Despite being an expert, he was unable to save the one thing that mattered most in his life. His head twinged with the slightest movement. He gripped his chair for support and arose with a wince. He tugged the sheet up and covered my face, his eyes glistening with mournful tears.

‘He was lost; he didn’t know how to go ahead from that point. Should he start making arrangements for my cremation and last rites? Should he call his family members? But first, he needed an Ibuprofen for his pounding headache. He went downstairs to the lab and found a strip kept in one of the cabinets. As he turned to go back upstairs, he heard some scuttling and a thud. Tej was not expecting it and almost jumped up in shock.

‘The source of the sound seemed to be behind the refrigerator. He gingerly stepped towards it and when he bent to peek underneath, Tej’s eyes widened in disbelief. It was Pooh! He was nibbling on something. The guinea pig saw him and tried to scurry away, but Tej grabbed hold of him and pulled him out. He peered at him in amusement and then looked up at the roof above, where my body lay. The lost hope was rekindled. Tej rushed back to check on me, holding Pooh in his hands. While ascending the stairs, he began to hear the distant beeps of the heart monitor. His own heart pulsated harder with every step he took. He entered the room. The monitors were displaying my vitals; the lines were no longer flat. I was breathing. His heart was thumping so loudly against his chest it could be heard across the room. It was happening! I was recovering! Tej came closer and sat beside me. As I opened my eyes, he clasped my hand between both of his

and placed his quivering lips on my knuckles. I was not aware then that I had come back from the dead. The drowsiness of the sleeping pills was still too strong for me to fully grasp what was happening.'

'The locations are scattered all over the country. Mansarovar is already compromised, which leaves us with eight cryptic destinations. The ones I've deciphered so far are Tejo Mahalaya of the Agravana, the Skeleton Lake and the crater in Bheemkund,' Ved Vyasa said to Ashwatthama and Om, who were back with Vrishkapi.

'What are these places? Where are they situated?' Vrishkapi's eyes widened as he had never stepped out of Mount Kailash.

Om answered this question on behalf of everyone present there. 'Agravana is an old name of Agra in Uttar Pradesh, Tejo Mahalaya is what we know today as the Taj Mahal. The Skeleton Lake is a peculiar lake in Roopkund, Uttarakhand. Bheemkund is a mysterious water reservoir situated in Madhya Pradesh. A natural water tank that is sure to satiate the ones who have a strong penchant to dig deep about mysterious places.'

'How do you know that?' Milarepa abruptly asked Ved Vyasa.

'Sound is energy that continues floating in the universe. I can hear every sound ever made and every word ever spoken and these three places are what I have managed to identify in relation to what we are trying to find,' the sage answered calmly.

'The duration between one crescent moon and the next gives them ample time to reach any of these destinations. How can we know where his next raid is going to be?' Milarepa thought aloud.

Ved Vyasa looked equally pensive about the challenge confronting them. 'I am not aware of a travel sequence to be followed, yet there might be one.'

'If you, wise sage, do not know of a travel sequence, then the possibility of there being one is highly unlikely,' Parashurama remarked.

'Vrishkapi, I want you to keep a check on Roopkund. Out of all the probable places, it is the only one devoid of humans. However, you must be immensely wary of being spotted as your burly physique is hard to miss. And the rest of us have to remain as covert as possible.' Vrishkapi was delighted to take up this responsibility as he would get to step out of Gyanganj and see novel landscapes. 'Milarepa, you go to the Taj Mahal. Make sure to wear clothes that cover you and use your powers to make your green skin inconspicuous. It is a populous area. You should be able to blend

in with the crowd conveniently. And I shall go to Bheemkund. It's in central India; they won't be able to cross that frontier from there.'

Parashurama's voice deepened as he spoke, 'The next crescent moon is three nights away. We need to be in our respective assigned locations on or before that night. Vrishkapi and Milarepa! Remember, once we are out of Kailash, amid humans, we shall refrain from using any powers unless it is the last resort. This means, Vrishkapi, do not fly or roar. Milarepa, do not use any magical powers and I shall avoid using any ancient weapons. Ved Vyasa, I request you to gather as much information as you can about Nagendra's mission through your meditation.'

Everyone got to work promptly. Om followed Parashurama and asked, 'What are your orders for me?'

Parashurama's gaze shifted from Om to Ashwatthama and back. 'Why do you think Ashwatthama has not been assigned to protect any location? Because you need to be protected as well. The only wall between Nagendra and his immortality is your blood and you are not equipped to save it for yourself right now. Try finishing your training soon.' Ashwatthama and Om shared a glance as Parashurama left.

Meanwhile, Nagendra and his team crossed the deep virgin forests, gurgling brooks, beckoning meadows and witnessed the stunning, mighty white peaks of the Himalayan ranges again on their way. They faced the challenges of zigzag trails and the biting cold winds under the billions of stars sprinkled in the majestic night sky, discovering the most primeval of the Himalayan oak and rhododendron forests, with the latter in bloom. They trekked towards the water body perched in the lap of the snow-clad Mount Trishul, situated at an altitude of 16,499 feet. The Roopkund glacial lake was close—he could see it now from a distance. They were almost at their destination, three days before the crescent moon.

Nagendra turned towards LSD and Parimal, who were right behind him, and pointed towards the frozen lake of Roopkund. 'What you see is called the Mystery Lake, known for the human skeletons lying at the bottom of the lake, which are distinctly visible when the snow melts.'

Nagendra retrieved the same ancient round metal bottle from his bag. Staring at the mystery lake of Roopkund, he held the bottle in one hand and said, caressing LSD's stomach with a wide grin on his face, 'The thought of a new life at the very place where I had killed a few so-called good men is strangely pleasant.'

LSD could see the scattered bones from where they stood and could not stop herself asking, ‘So you know the real story of this massacre!’

Nagendra closed his eyes and smiled cynically, basking in the memory of his wickedness. ‘Now that you have what I need inside you, you deserve to be answered. Among all the theories regarding these skeletons, the one that is true is that I slaughtered all these people. The finest memory of this place etched in my mind is of dragging the corpse of the man I loathed the most after killing him with this bottle.’

‘Who was he?’

‘LSD, you will need a few more lifetimes to know me completely. Wait for them,’ Nagendra smirked.

‘A few lifetimes! As if she would remember all of this in her next life and he will answer it then,’ thought Parimal, who simply stood there. Parimal looked silently at them. With a failed attempt at concealing her displeasure beneath a half-hearted smile, LSD asked another question to change the topic, ‘What are our orders?’ Parimal also had questions, but this time they were not for Nagendra and LSD could sense it.

‘These skeletons are not lying here without a reason. These men were under an oath that I was unaware of when I murdered them. Their remnants scattered here are still bound to that oath and hence they continue to fulfil it. They vowed to protect the very word we have come here to steal. From the month of अश्विन (September-end) to फाल्गुन (February-end), the lake is frozen, making it impossible to dive in and search for the word. This is when the skeletons sleep beneath the frozen lake as the word is secured by the ice. In the remaining months, when it thaws, the skeletons awaken to guard the word. We are in the month of फाल्गुन, so the layers of ice are brittle and melting. The skeletons, therefore, are semiconscious and unprepared for any raids. That gives us a slight advantage over them for the time being.

‘I don’t know where the word is. I don’t know how they will attack us to defend the word, but the pages of the book have taught me how to find it. When the snow melts, the skeletons wake up and come out, guarding the word. This word was travelling to Dhanvantari through someone but thanks to me, he never reached his destination. The word remains in his head till date. Though I know this word, according to the process, I have to drink it to activate it. Submerged at the deepest point in the lake is his skull, shielded by ice for six months and by the remaining skeletons for the

remainder of the year. We are in that transitional period when both, the ice and the skeletons, are vulnerable. One is losing its strength by thawing and another has not completely amassed the vigour to fight. We have seventy-two hours to find that skull and extract the next word before the frozen ice gradually melts to water and the skeletons rise to their full power.'

LSD and Parimal started taking out all the gadgets to do the needful, which included a GPR (ground penetrating radar), a CO2 laser and their weapons. LSD wore a Bluetooth headset and handed two others to Parimal and Nagendra to aid instant communication.

While they were establishing their communication links in Roopkund, Om, having lost all contact and communication with the outside world, stood solitary at the edge of Mount Kailash. Staring blankly at the destroyed Mansarovar, he mourned the horrendous death of Dhanvantari and resented himself for losing Mrit Sanjeevani to Nagendra. The sound of approaching footsteps drew him out of his bitter reverie. He turned to see Milarepa walking up to him. Om's sombre expression changed to one of distress upon seeing Dhanvantari's killer.

'You didn't leave for the Taj Mahal?'

'Yes, I am just about to, and meeting you is the last thing I have to do before leaving.'

Om chose to stay silent, his eyes unwilling to meet Milarepa's. He was devastated and furious, and he wanted Milarepa to know that.

'Om, I know how you feel about Dhanvantari's loss. I know that you blame me and hate me for his death and that's natural, but you need to know that what I did to Dhanvantari was my faithful obedience to his command. He was suffering in captivity. He was much older than the last time you had seen him, and was constantly inflicted with torment. I am sure you know what happens to a body starved of sunlight. He was confined in the dark, where not even a flimsy ray of sunlight had entered for years. He had lost track of time completely. He wasn't alive; he was barely surviving. I didn't kill him, Om. I liberated him of his woes because he urged me to. He told me to first release him and then reach Kailash, seek Parashurama and tell him about you.'

Om's face remained passive, unmoved by everything he was hearing, and Milarepa let out a helpless sigh. 'I am sorry; that was the best I could have done for him and for you.'

Milarepa then trudged towards the steep fall to join Parashurama and Vrishkapi, who were already on their way to their respective destinations.

Om was disappointed at Parashurama's decision. He was supposed to stay here and do nothing. This state was nearly universal, though, as nearly the whole world was locked down at the time because of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was March 2020. The best thing one could have done to save the world at the time was simply remain indoors. Ashwatthama could see Om's frustration and tried to divert his attention. 'I know how you feel right now. I have endured this feeling of helplessness for centuries, hopelessly wandering in the jungles with pus oozing from my forehead and a never-healing leprosy consuming my body due to Lord Krishna's curse.' Om, too, wished to divert his attention from the thoughts that were consuming him and so he participated, questioning Ashwatthama.

'There have been reports of people claiming they have spotted you around the River Narmada with wounds all over your body. It is said that you will receive salvation at the hands of Kalki, Vishnu's tenth incarnation. How much of it is the truth? Another question I often mulled over was how you broke the curse.'

'I didn't. Parashurama got me out of it. That is why I suggest you have faith, obey and follow Parashurama and yes, it is true that Kalki will be the one to grant me moksha,' replied Ashwatthama. That answer led to another question from Om.

'Parashurama broke the curse of Lord Krishna! What happened afterwards?' Another question led to another answer and thus Ashwatthama took Om through his past.

'Years passed. Krishna and his brother, Balrama, left the mortal realm. All the Kauravas and the remaining warriors from the Mahabharata era passed away. Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Kunti retired to the forest and perished in a forest fire. You, as Vidur, vanished. The Pandavas experienced a deep sense of emptiness after Krishna's departure, and so they handed over the kingdom to Arjuna's grandson Parikshit. With Draupadi, the Pandavas left for the forest, never to return.

'All this while, I continued to wander till I was told about the ashram of Parashurama in Prag tirtha, now renamed Prayagraj. Parashurama has been the guru of three of the mightiest warriors of the Mahabharata—Bhishma Pitamah, Surya Putra Karna and my father, Guru Dronacharya. It was suggested to me that Guru Parashurama might sympathize with me and

guide me on the path of salvation as I was the son of one of his most famous prodigies. With the hope of getting rid of my cursed body, I crawled along, searching for Parashurama's ashram for months.

'After arriving at his ashram somehow and waiting for a few more months, I finally met Parashurama. By then, he had already learnt about me and my deeds and bluntly refused to help, ordering me to leave immediately. He had passed his verdict, but I implored him to save me for the sake of Dronacharya, who had worshipped him until his last breath. I told him that the wrath that had blinded me into the arms of revenge was a consequence of the unethical murder of his disciple and my father, Dronacharya, by the Pandavas. I urged him to believe that my love for his prodigy was similar to his love for my father; that Parashurama was like a father to him. Eventually, Parashurama realized my love and devotion towards my father and understood the reason for my revenge. He promised to help me.'

'But you were cursed by Lord Krishna himself. How can anybody lift such a curse?'

Ashwatthama closed his eyes and recited with great praise and reverence.

'मुनिभिः पन्नगैर्वापि सुरैर्वा शापितो यदि।
कालमृत्युभयाद्वापि गुरूरक्षति पार्वति
अशक्ता हि सुराद्याश्चाशक्ता मुनयस्तथा।
गुरुशापेन तेशीघ्रंक्षयंयान्ति न संशयः'

Continuing to explain the meaning of the Sanskrit verse, Ashwatthama said, 'This is a verse from *Guru Gita* written by Ved Vyasa. *Guru Gita* describes a conversation between Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati, when Parvati asks Shiva to enlighten her about the guru and liberation. As an answer to Parvati's question, Shiva recites this verse, which means that if the disciple is cursed by the gods, the guru can protect and liberate the disciple. A guru can protect the disciple from even *kaal* (death) and from the fear of death. But if the guru himself curses the disciple, then the disciple gradually becomes feeble, eventually attains destruction, and even the gods cannot save such a disciple from such a curse.

'Dronacharya was not only my father but my guru as well and Parashurama is the guru of my guru. Everything that I learnt from my father

was bestowed upon him by Parashurama, and was ultimately passed on to me. Thus, Parashurama was my guru as well.

‘Parashurama then told me that he could not grant me salvation and release me from Lord Krishna’s curse completely, but he could relieve me of my wounds, aches and leprosy till Kalki arrives to grant me salvation. In the following years, Parashurama gradually cured me of leprosy and all other illnesses. The day finally dawned in Parashurama’s hut when I was half-rid of the bane and all the accompanying misery. That was the day I witnessed something so incredible that I would never want to face it again in my life.’ As Ashwatthama fell silent, his eyes flashed with absolute terror and he was so lost in horror that Om had to bring him back by asking him what he saw. An immortal warrior as valiant as Ashwatthama seemed petrified by a mere reminiscence. Om noticed Ashwatthama gulp the lump in his throat before continuing, ‘I saw Ashwatthama standing right in front of me.’

‘What do you mean?’ Om furrowed his brows.

‘I saw a man who looked exactly like me, with the pus and the leprosy, the pain and the hatred, the strength and the purpose, the power and the revenge. He was a devil who held all the antagonism prevalent in my body, heart and soul. He was standing right in front of my eyes, trying to get back inside me. I felt vulnerable and frightened, as if I were a child thrown in front of a famished crocodile. Never in my life had I experienced such terror. He was striving to grasp and overpower me with his rage and dominance, but Parashurama did not let that happen. He asked me to leave the hut.’

‘Who was he?’ Om’s mouth was agape in absolute confusion.

‘Parashurama had split me into two selves, which created a lookalike. The good in me had the upper hand until my father was killed and the evil of anger and revenge overruled that part of me after his death. When I was separated from my negative alter ego, I felt weak and the lookalike who stood opposite me was twice as powerful. I was a mere body recovering from illness and was simply no match for him. Every person has both good and evil dwelling in them as we are in between the first yuga, which was the most pious phase of Satya yuga, and the worst phase of the end of Kali yuga with no trace of optimism. That is why some are directed by good and others by evil. The dominant part within a person dictates their character. But it’s been millennia now and I have regained that strength in all these

years by being with Parashurama ever since as his disciple.' Ashwatthama smiled softly.

'And what happened to your negative self? Where is he?'

'I don't know. I tried to ask about him indirectly at times but one day, Parashurama told me sternly that I don't need to know about him. I never tried to enquire about him ever again,' Ashwatthama concluded.

'Today, for the first time, I have seen fear in your eyes, Ashwatthama,' Om looked away as he confessed.

'Yes! Because he still haunts me. He walked and talked just like me and he possessed all the knowledge and power I had back then. The only difference between us was that he had bloodshot eyes filled with malevolence and vengeance.'

While Ashwatthama and Om were knitting a bond between themselves, Parimal was preoccupied with breaking the ice to reach as deep as he could. LSD continued to examine everything beneath the water through the GPR that was scanning the mystery lake inch by inch, unaware that Vrishkapi was closing in on the spot with each step. He walked alongside Milarepa and Parashurama.

'Can I ask you for a favour, Milarepa?' Vrishkapi said.

'Yes?' responded Milarepa humbly.

'I am a little confused here. Will you please correct me if I have misunderstood anything?' said Vrishkapi.

'About?' asked a muddled Milarepa.

'Dhanvantari wrote a book named Mrit Sanjeevani, which was kept safe with Om, but has now been stolen from him by some old man named Nagendra. Nagendra is the same man whom you once worked for and then betrayed by killing Dhanvantari to reach Parshuram. And you did this to save the protector of Dhanvantari's book from the one who once thought his secret was safe with you. I am not sure what I said, but did I say it right?'

'Yes! You did,' replied an embarrassed Milarepa.

'But whose side are you on? I am confused,' the naive Vrishkapi asked again.

'I am on your side,' replied Milarepa, putting a friendly hand on Vrishkapi's shoulder.

'You worked for the old thief. So, who is he? Vrishkapi sounded curious.

'I don't know.' Lost in the oblivion of his past, Milarepa withdrew his hand, but the trail of questions was not over.

‘Okay! But you risked your life to reach Parashurama, for Om. Who *is* Om?’ Vrishkapi persisted.

‘I don’t know,’ said Milarepa, still looking into oblivion, which irritated Vrishkapi, who only wanted straight and simple answers.

‘You don’t know the one you worked for and you don’t know the one you saved. Who knows it then?’

‘The one I worked for and the one I saved—Nagendra and Om,’ replied Milarepa, humbly sensing and calming Vrishkapi’s childish anger, before both of them were called by Parashurama.

‘Here, this will stay on you at all times,’ Parashurama announced as he stuck microchips to the backs of their necks. ‘It’s a tracker. This will help me trace both your locations on my device.’ He then handed them a set of clothes with their respective maps to follow and turned to Milarepa with some money in his hands.

‘This is the currency accepted in India now. It will help. You have a long journey through many cities ahead,’ Parashurama said, handing over a bundle of Indian currency.

Milarepa took a glimpse and smiled meekly, ‘Thank you, sir, but I won’t need it for anything.’

Parashurama informed him that the world as he knew it had changed drastically, and so he might just require it. Keeping it and not using it was better than needing it and not having it. Milarepa took the money from Parashurama only to honour his words as he was still sure that it wasn’t a necessity.

Looking at the money, Vrishkapi asked innocently, ‘What’s that? Can I also have some?’

‘It’s not a good thing and you won’t need it because you are not meeting any men.’ Parashurama shook his head gently as if persuading a child.

Vrishkapi frowned with a little pout, and so Parashurama smiled lightly and handed him a single note. ‘Here, you can keep it.’

Vrishkapi’s face lit up instantly. ‘Thank you!’

‘Now wear the clothes I have given you,’ Parashurama said as Vrishkapi’s contagious smile was passed on to him.

Vrishkapi obeyed and started to struggle with the clothes while trying to put them on.

‘Has he travelled out of Gyanganj for the first time?’ Milarepa asked.

‘Yes, he has. He does not want money; he just wants to have it because you have it and is simply curious to know how the coloured piece of paper works.’

‘But isn’t it risky to send him out alone?’ said a concerned Milarepa. In Parshuram’s eyes, Milarepa was right and so he justified his decision.

‘Sending anyone to counter Nagendra is risky. In fact, sending him anywhere away from Gyanganj is risky, as he has never been out before. That is why I am sending him to a desolate area like Roopkund, which is relatively close to Kailash and closed to humans in this season. He is obedient. He may be too innocent to confront the world but he is powerful enough to tackle Nagendra. Now wear this and get going. May the gods be with you.’

By then, Vrishkapi had managed to wear the shirt, pants and the monkey cap, but his discomfort was obvious as he struggled to adjust his tail, which was inside one of the trouser legs. Parashurama looked at him and spoke solemnly, ‘Whatever happens, do not take these clothes off, Vrishkapi. Remember your way from Kailash to Roopkund and follow the same route to return to Kailash.’ Nodding his head and adjusting his pants, Vrishkapi acknowledged both instructions.

While Vrishkapi was all set for Roopkund, at the mystery lake there, everything LSD could see on the screen was completely frigid, with no hint of life. The first day passed and one-sixth of the lake was scanned, but nothing significant turned up, so they decided to continue at night. The clear, starry sky loomed over them as they continued to destroy the serenity of the surroundings, ignorant of the screams of nature echoing through the mountain valleys, while Vrishkapi was still two days away from saving it. They worked all night long, yet the monitor displayed nothing but the carcasses. It was twilight when Parashurama, Milarepa and Vrishkapi departed for their separate locations from the Uttarakhand–Nepal border. The closest from that point was Roopkund for Vrishkapi and the farthest was Bheemkund for Parashurama. Somewhere between the destinations of Vrishkapi and Parashurama stood, in all its glory, the Taj Mahal of Agra in Uttar Pradesh, Milarepa’s destination.

The day passed and the sun began to sink in the west, but nothing changed on either side as Nagendra and his team continued their search and Parashurama and his team continued their hike.

At the end of the second night, hardly half of the lake was scanned, which frustrated the three. Nagendra's patience was wearing thin, so he ordered them to accelerate the search; the crescent moon was just one night away. Hiding in the woods and dodging human settlements, Vrishkapi continued his journey towards Roopkund. It was dusk when LSD detected some heat signals beneath the ground in one spot and Parimal rushed to see what it was while Nagendra kept an eye on the surroundings, anticipating danger in some form or the other.

Parimal followed the scanner's reading and dunked his hand underwater. LSD could see the heat of Parimal's hand overlapping the previous heat trace, but Parimal couldn't touch anything solid or sense anything alive. LSD told him to dig a little deeper, suspecting that he might have been tapping the surface right above the thing. As he plunged his arm deeper in, his fingers grazed against something solid beneath the layer of ice. The surface felt ragged to the touch. Trying to estimate its size, he gripped it firmly to extract it. He tried to pull it out, but it wouldn't budge. As Parimal clutched it securely underwater, LSD peeled her eyes away from the scanning monitor when she sensed something shuffle on her right. She saw a human bone moving itself. Her eyes wandered and examined the premises, only to realize that almost all the bestrewn bones were shaking. She looked at Parimal, who was still struggling.

She shouted for Nagendra to bring his attention to what she was witnessing. 'The bones are moving. What are your orders?'

Nagendra, who was still preoccupied raking the periphery far and wide for potential threats, snapped his head up to see that the crescent moon was emerging out of the diminishing sunlight.

He yelled, 'It's time! It's time! The moon is out. The bone guards are waking up. We only have a few hours left to find it. Ask Parimal to—' Nagendra swallowed the rest of his sentence when he spotted a giant approaching the lake.

'Shh!' Nagendra whispered. 'Someone is coming; save Parimal and hide.' Instead of daring to tackle the upcoming danger, Nagendra hid himself, quietly lying straight on the ground. Near the shore of the lake, LSD did the same while keeping an eye on Parimal, who continued to pour all his strength into uprooting what he held.

Vrishkapi reached one of the mountain tops near Roopkund. Oblivious of a stretched out Nagendra on the ground right beside his feet, he looked

around, sweeping the perimeter with his eyes. Tents, torches, monitors, ropes and other suspicious material scattered around the lake made the presence of humans evident for him. It was then that he saw a man perched in the middle of the freezing water, trying to fish something out. Parimal spotted Vrishkapi too. Both of them knew what to do, and so did LSD. Still unaware of Nagendra lying so close to his foot, he sprinted down the slope to grab Parimal. By then, Parimal had managed to pry the object a little loose from whatever it was cemented in, but he knew that if he left it then, he would lose it. On the other hand, the speed and size of Vrishkapi could have sent chills down anyone's spine and Parimal could see him advancing with all his might. Parimal's wide, frightened eyes switched to LSD, who was hastily loading her Origin-12 shotgun as she recovered from the sight of the humongous Vrishkapi. At this point, the crescent moon was fully visible.

The ground trembled with Vrishkapi's mighty footsteps, awakening the army of skeletons. They started to close in on him from all sides. Looking at the alert bone guards, Parimal ceased all his activity so that the skeletons would only attack Vrishkapi. It was up to LSD to aim correctly and stop the enormous ape before he could nab Parimal. Vrishkapi charged towards Parimal as the bone guards darted towards him. LSD took her shot. She fired thirty rounds in less than eight seconds, hitting all of Vrishkapi's left side. But the bullets barely injured him. However, due to his momentum, his body was thrown off balance and hit the ground. The firing had caught Vrishkapi completely off-guard. The bone guards immediately pounced on him and assaulted him with their bones and the rocks that they held as weapons. With a swift swoop of his arm, he effortlessly brushed away the clutter of carcasses. LSD realized that he couldn't be taken down by guns, he had to be captured. She took out a net gun from her kit and aimed before shooting. The net entangled its target by tightly wrapping itself around Vrishkapi's body, electrocuting him and making him immobile.

Vrishkapi's struggle had given Parimal some time, but he still grappled with the skull as it was firmly lodged in the lake. He hooked his fingers in the skull's hollow eye sockets and tried to rip it out with all his strength, but it still didn't budge. Through his clenched jaw and squinted eyes, Parimal could sense Vrishkapi freeing himself from the net and advancing towards him again. He did not have much time. LSD fired more rounds with her shotgun but that didn't seem to affect Vrishkapi's galloping frame.

Before they could do anything else, Vrishkapi grabbed him and with one shove of his hand, hurled Parimal with great force. This assault worked in Parimal's favour as his hand, which was stuck underground, whipped out the skull with the backbone dangling from it. Nagendra saw it all and knew that this was it. As soon as Parimal crashed on the ice, Vrishkapi charged at him rapidly. The skull in Parimal's hand had also drawn the attention of the bone guards to him. In no time, a cluster of bone guards started emerging from every rock around Roopkund. Before anything could be done, Vrishkapi snatched the skull from Parimal's hand. In the process, the skull cracked open and the moonlight fell on the interiors of the upper skull; it shone silver as the moonlight touched it and there emerged the two words engraved in it 'अनादि अनंता (Anadi Ananta)', which meant 'eternal.' LSD continued shooting both the bone guards and Vrishkapi. The bone guards would shatter on the ground, only to regroup to form a whole skeleton again and continue to attack. And as for Vrishkapi, the bullets from LSD's gun failed to disturb him.

Nagendra had been lying low so far to hide from Vrishkapi, but now it was time to finally intervene, as the skull that he needed was in Vrishkapi's possession. With the skull in one hand, Vrishkapi picked up Parimal with his other and threw him away. Ignorant of other potential assaults, Vrishkapi kept warding off the bone guards around him. Nagendra commanded LSD through the earpiece to stop firing at Vrishkapi as he had the skull in his hand and they couldn't risk anything happening to it. LSD stepped back, looking at Vrishkapi's eyes, which belonged to a furious animal. Just then, Nagendra darted towards him, lunged at him the way a predator does to hunt their prey, and landed on Vrishkapi's back. Nagendra's speed and tactics astounded LSD and Parimal. Before he could react, Nagendra sunk his teeth deep into Vrishkapi's neck. Of all the attacks on Vrishkapi in Roopkund, this was the most lethal. He tore off a big chunk of Vrishkapi's flesh. Vrishkapi bled heavily as a major artery supplying blood to the rest of the body from the heart was ruptured.

Within seconds, Nagendra was off Vrishkapi's back and on his feet again. Without wasting any time, he snatched the skull from his hand, opened his ancient metal bottle and poured some water into the skull, using the broken piece of the upper skull as a goblet. Some bone guards continued attacking and mounting the fainting Vrishkapi. Parimal and LSD kept all the bone guards at bay so they couldn't interrupt Nagendra. They could sense an

increasing multitude of the skeletons waking up. They were soon going to be overpowered. Parimal knew that he would have to use his hand grenade to escape as there was no way that they could fight such a colossal horde of skeletons. He waited for Nagendra to finish the process as that would be their cue to flee.

As soon as the water touched the inner surface of the silver shining skull, the inscription dissolved into the water, turning it into a sublime turquoise. Vrishkapi, overpowered by the fleet of skeletons, helplessly watched his mission fail in front of him. Nagendra was savagely chewing on the piece of Vrishkapi's fresh flesh, and sipping the celestial water from the skull to wash the piece down. When he gulped his turquoise drink, it was visible to LSD and Parimal as it travelled down his throat. Vrishkapi knew he had to escape or else he would be killed either by the brainless skeletons, or by the debased Nagendra and his team. The only way to evade all of it at once was to resort to the last tactic that Parashurama had prohibited him from exhibiting. Vrishkapi closed his eyes and took a moment to decide while the bone guards continued to assault him. Right then, Parimal got his cue from Nagendra: the word had been acquired. He pulled the pin of the hand grenade and threw it on the icy lake.

Vrishkapi gathered all his strength one last time and flew high up, away from the ground, with a clump of skeletons still clawing him, just seconds before the grenade fell. The guards dangling from him fell one by one, leaving many bleeding wounds on his body. Nagendra watched him escape, still chewing on the last bits of his flesh. The blast resonated violently throughout the silence and created an avalanche in the snow-clad mountains surrounding the lake, leaving very little time for LSD, Parimal and Nagendra to save themselves. Parimal saw the skeletons dragging LSD by her legs into a rocky cluster. Seconds later, huge boulders and tons of ice that rolled down from all sides of the lake engulfed the area. By the time the landslide ceased, everything was covered by the thick layers of snow. There was no sign of Nagendra and his team and the mysterious lake with all its skeletons lost its existence forever that night.

Brutally injured and barbarously bitten on his neck, Vrishkapi continued flying without realizing that he was attracting the attention of many ordinary human eyes on his route back to Mount Kailash, giving them opportunities to capture him on their mobile phones as images and videos. Vrishkapi's sight was slowly dimming due to the heavy loss of blood and

exhaustion. Unable to see much farther ahead and unaware that humans had now learnt the secret of Vimana Purana and they could fly now, he collided into a small, low-flying aircraft above the Himalayan range, plummeting to one of the mountains and disappearing into the dense layers of snow due to the impact of his fall and body weight. Unconscious and helpless, Vrishkapi was impossible to be seen or found in the vast, majestic Himalayas.

Chapter 8

Lost and Found

On the night of the crescent moon, Milarepa and Parashurama reached their respective destinations of Agra and Bheemkund, prepared for an attack, unaware of the annihilation of Roopkund.

After staying vigilant all night around the Taj Mahal to ensure its safety and coming across no signs of Nagendra, Milarepa decided to head back. While walking down the street, he heard someone animatedly describing something seen in the sky the night before. Milarepa turned to locate the source of the voice. It was a news anchor on television, reporting that the locals on the border of Nepal and Uttarakhand had spotting a giant flying monkey, supported by a blurry phone video that captured a choppy footage of the flying Vrishkapi. Some claimed that it was Lord Hanuman; others said it was a man in trousers and a shirt. A few others opined that the flying being was an alien and some rejected the whole story on the grounds that it was a media stunt for publicity. 'It's Tuesday, the day dedicated to the worship of Hanuman. This is fake news, news channels are doing it just to garner the favour of Hanuman devotees,' Milarepa heard the person next to him speak while shaking his head. But Milarepa realized the truth. Something had gone terribly wrong at Roopkund for Vrishkapi to have used his flying abilities. He was positive that Agra was safe till the next crescent moon, so he decided to go back and check on Vrishkapi immediately.

Oblivious to the tragedies occurring in the outside world, Om sat with a vacant, stretched bow, concentrating hard. After a few minutes of powerful chanting, he was able to summon an astra.

'Well done, Om. That was quick,' Ashwatthama beamed. His student was exhibiting steady progress at possessing, commanding and controlling the astras.

Om opened his eyes. 'Whatever is happening right now has its roots in my failure in losing Mrit Sanjeevani. Ironically, I am the only one who is unable to help. The mission has in fact been weakened by keeping you back

here with me. I have to be ready as soon as possible,' said Om determinedly.

'Are you ready to learn the next one?' asked Ashwatthama.

'Yes. Please teach me everything you can and I shall do everything in my power to contribute to this mission.'

Ashwatthama closed his eyes and chanted with his palms open, as if waiting to summon something out of thin air. In a few moments, an arrow appeared in his hands that had a rudraksha at the tip. He gradually stopped chanting and raised the arrow to touch his forehead with it while Om observed quietly.

'What I hold in my hands contains the power of a Rudra. This is called Rudrastra. When it is used, it invokes the power of one of the Rudras out of the Ekadasha (eleven) Rudras and destroys thousands of enemies. I had used this during the night slaughter at the end of the Kurukshetra war.' Ashwatthama lowered his head as he recalled the incident.

The assurance that Bheemkund was safe was more disturbing than relaxing because this meant that Nagendra's absence here was due to his encounter with either Milarepa or Vrishkapi, and if not that, then some other place out of the remaining eight must have been wiped off the face of the land of gods. Parashurama retrieved his tracker and switched it on to locate Vrishkapi and Milarepa. To his surprise, he could track only one of the two. He saw a red dot in Agra moving away from the Taj Mahal, but there was no trace of Vrishkapi and the tracking history only showed him reaching Roopkund, not leaving it. He decided to head back to Kailash to check on the others.

'While Parashurama was keeping a vigil on the macro world and making decisions for its welfare, someone else in another part of the country was focused entirely on a micro world that revolved only around me. Tej loved me so much,' Mrs Batra sighed as her eyes turned moist. 'I was convalescing, so I had to rest a lot. Tej was my shadow throughout that period. He cared for me as if I was not his healing wife but his newborn baby. His once gloomy eyes now twinkled with happiness, as if he too had dodged death and come to life again.'

Prithvi nodded in understanding and continued with his story. 'While you were regaining hope to live again in that room, Vrishkapi, buried under layers of ice below the open sky, was losing it with every passing hour. His

blood was leaching into the ice around him through his fresh wounds in that deafening silence.

Meanwhile, Nagendra had woken up to realize that Parimal and LSD were buried under the thick white sheets of ice that had swallowed Roopkund forever. Nagendra had lost track of time; he had no idea how long he had lain unconscious. He got back to his feet and started searching for LSD immediately, like a mentally disturbed man, quivering and baffled, like a father in search of his missing child. After looking about frantically for a few hours without any sense of direction or method, he finally found Parimal.

He pulled him out, wrapped him with everything he managed to find from their hideout—sleeping bags, tent canvas, ropes—anything he could get his hands on to keep him warm. Parimal was shivering, his breathing was violently ragged and the insulation Nagendra provided seemed to have no effect. He could barely keep his eyes open, but just before he fainted, he pointed towards the tips of two giant black rocks and mumbled through his chattering teeth, ‘Before the avalanche, I saw LSD grabbed by her legs and dragged by the skeletons into those rocks.’ Nagendra’s mind went into a frenzy again. He saw the tip of the rocks peeking out of the ice and rushed towards them. The gap between both the rocks was sealed by ice walls created by the snowslide. Nagendra pushed it a little and the recently formed wall promptly collapsed.

He peered inside and saw LSD. She was conscious but her body language was absurd. It was as if she was possessed by some invisible power; she was taking off her clothes when Nagendra spotted her. This would lower the rate of heat generation in her body. To stop her, it was imperative to divert her attention from her actions and so Nagendra shouted her name, ‘Latika!’

LSD turned towards the voice and met Nagendra’s worried gaze. Her eyes were disoriented and she was combative. She moved her hands and growled like a zombie, as if trying to shove and hit somebody, despite there being no threat. After punching the air around her a couple of times, she stopped growling and turned towards the dead end on the other side of the rocks, undressing completely.

Nagendra started breaking the ice to make enough space to get in while the now naked LSD reached the last corner of the rock before starting to coil into a naturally created pocket in the rock which was much smaller than her. Her mannerisms were strange enough to have terrified anyone but

Nagendra. He knew that LSD was experiencing the hide-and-die syndrome that occurs in the final stages of hypothermia. This happens mostly in cases where the person's temperature drops gradually. Nagendra knew this as he had witnessed the same behaviour, at the same place, in the past.

Nagendra entered the ice cave to save LSD and bring her back to her senses. He knew that this attempt could be fatal for both of them, but he had to do everything he could. He walked towards the narrow dead end where LSD was struggling to fit. He grabbed her hand to pull her out, but LSD was hallucinating. Instead of Nagendra, she saw a skeleton tugging her wrist, so she began to attack and bite. Nagendra had no choice but to hit her hard to knock her out. He did so without any hesitation. A single blow with a small rock on the right side of her head was enough. LSD's eyes rolled back into her head and she fell limp and unconscious on the ground. Nagendra bundled her up in both their clothes and dragged her out.

Meanwhile, in Agra, Milarepa reached Tajganj Basai, which had a private chopper tour facility. Within an hour, he had the pilot completely hypnotized. This was an emergency situation; he had no option but to use his powers. The pilot started flying the chopper towards the Himalayas in search of Vrishkapi.

On Kailash, Om sat in silence, meditating and chanting the mantras Ashwatthama had given him to control and command the weapons, but something seemed to be distracting him. He kept wincing, shaking his head and restarting the process all over again. Ashwatthama noticed that Om was not calm within, so he asked him the reason. Om initially demurred but Ashwatthama insisted. With a deep sigh, Om shared what was bothering him.

'While you explained Rudrastra to me, you felt guilty because you remembered that you had made the mistake of using it on the night after the end of the Mahabharata, on people who were not your enemies. You know who you were before and who you are now. You know that your father was Dronacharya and your mother Kripi. You know what happened to them and how they left their bodies. You know your birthplace, your existence and your end too. You know yourself. Can you imagine not knowing anything about yourself, your origin, your friends and enemies, your past and future, your purpose of life? It's like having eyes but no vision and believe me . . . walking in eternal darkness with a quivering hope to see some light, someday, is dreadful. Who am I? Where was I born? My parents! How did

they look? What happened to them? Did I ever have brothers or sisters? You cannot understand how I feel and what I experience every day when these questions cross my mind.'

Ashwatthama could really sympathize with Om's agony but was as powerless as him. 'You are right! I cannot understand it, but I believe that the answers you are searching for in the external world might just be within you, Om.'

Dismissing Ashwatthama's counsel bluntly, Om said in frustration, 'I am not in a position to endure a spirituality class right now, Ashwatthama. Let us get back to what we were doing. Parashurama will be back any day and you will be answerable to him if I fail.'

'Spirituality! No, Om. I am talking about psychology and neuroscience. Memories are usually stored in distributed brain networks, including in the cortex, and thus can be readily accessed to consciously remember an event. But in an abnormal brain state, the brain activates its subcortical memory regions. Blocked memories reroute the processing of memories within the brain circuits so that they can't be consciously accessed.

'You could be thousands of years old and everything dating back to your birth might have lost its existence in your current state of mind, but there is one dark cave where all your memories lie hidden—your brain! Just because you do not remember does not mean that it's not preserved in your brain. It just means that you have not found the right cues to recollect those memories. You have questions that no one else but you can answer. And for that, you need to let your mind and soul become utterly serene and surrender to the weapons you are trying to possess. How can you give something that you don't have? You don't have yourself completely. Achieving that needs a person to completely know themselves inside out. You need to know yourself; only then will these weapons accept you. Everything that we are trying to do here will be in vain until and unless you thoroughly learn yourself. Imagine a pot of water with a crack in it. What would happen if you tried to fill it? Consider the knowledge as the water in the pot of your brain, which needs to be leakproof. Before we jump to our next weapon, let's go and explore your inner self.'

Om was not so optimistic about the seemingly promising explanation. 'You really think I have never tried that before?'

'I am sure you have, but not with me. I cannot give up without trying. If we could only break the first barrier of your brain, then the others will be

able to break the remaining walls,' said Ashwatthama

'Others?' Om didn't understand what Ashwatthama implied by that.

Ashwatthama nodded and replied, 'Now close your eyes and let me in. Attain the highest level of calmness in you and take me to your first memories.'

Far away, in an uncharted location, flying somewhere above the series of Himalayas desperately, Milarepa was keeping out a keen eye for Vrishkapi. But that was a large area to cover. It was like searching for a black cat in a coal cellar. All that was visible from where he soared was a cluster of mountains covered with snow. Even after looming over the peaks for several hours, he could not find a single string leading to Vrishkapi. The sun was about to set and Milarepa knew that either Vrishkapi was already dead or would not be able to survive one more night beneath the ice.

A clueless Milarepa's hope was exiting the horizon along with the setting sun. He remembered Vrishkapi's face from the last time he had seen him. Something struck Milarepa as he recollected his final few minutes with Parashurama and Vrishkapi before they had departed for their respective destinations. Milarepa ordered the pilot to take him above the location where all three of them had taken their separate routes. In a few minutes, with Milarepa's directions, the chopper hovered right above that place. Milarepa commanded the pilot to fly low and slow towards Mount Kailash and kept his eyes on the ground to look for anything unusual.

Meanwhile, in Roopkund, Nagendra, draped in frostbite, was now feeling the effects of the cold settle in. He realized that hypothermia had not spared him either. He knew that he didn't have much time before all three of them died. As if things couldn't get worse, everything turned invisible when the whole area was painted white by a ruthless snowstorm. He brought LSD out to where Parimal lay unconscious. Shivering in the biting cold, Nagendra tied both of them facing each other and wrapped them tightly with blankets and sleeping bags. He then tied both their legs together with one end of the rope, kept the other end on his shoulder and started lugging them through the ice as if dragging dead bodies.

As he walked, he saw another young man parallel to him, dragging a real dead body that was more than half decayed. The man had Nagendra's ancient metal bottle hung on his neck. The man looked at Nagendra and his lips curved into a cynical smile. The much older Nagendra reciprocated with the same kind of smile. The hypothermia was now causing him to

hallucinate. After walking a short distance in the opposite direction, the man walking north towards Kailash Parbat vanished in the storm whereas Nagendra headed south, away from the cold.

What had struck Milarepa earlier was that Vrishkapi must have followed the same route back to Kailash on account of Parashurama's orders. Thus, tracing the same course, Milarepa saw a red spot that was distinctly visible amid the sparkling white. It was surrounded by a pack of white wolves who were trying to dig around it. By the time he could register what it was, the chopper had already crossed it. Milarepa ordered the pilot to turn the chopper and take it back to that location.

The sky would soon be awash with the darker hue of dusk. Milarepa knew that he would lose the spot once the sun set. Darkness was taking over rapidly as he found the spot again. It was surrounded by large rocks that made it impossible for the chopper to land. He ordered the pilot to land at the nearest possible location. The pilot found a plain surface nearly half a mile away. Milarepa landed and looked up to the sky for the moon, but the clouds blocked all light from the land. He had to think quickly. He pocketed a torch which was in the chopper kit. He knew the direction he had to go in but was unsure if he would be able to find the place. He started running.

After half a mile, he stopped and surveyed the area, but the spot was nowhere to be found in the dark. Milarepa continued to look for the wounded Vrishkapi, but disappointment was all he could gather. After searching for hours, Milarepa decided to return to the chopper and turned to go back the same way, following his own footsteps. The moment he pointed the torch's light downwards, he saw red footprints stained on the snow. He realized that he had been standing over the spot all this while, but due to the torch pointing forwards, the light could never tell him about it. Now he had to rely on his own footprints to lead him to the bigger red spot. Milarepa hurried back on the newfound trail of his own footsteps and soon reached it.

The ice had already been dug to some extent. This partial job seemed to have been done by the pack of scavenging white wolves he had spotted from the chopper earlier. The next challenge was to dig the remaining ice. Milarepa desperately wanted the buried body to be of Vrishkapi as this was the last string that could lead to him. As Milarepa began grabbing the ice with his bare hands in the piercingly frigid landscape, a wave of deep growls emanated from all around him.

Milarepa picked up his torch to check the surroundings and saw a few pairs of eyes glowing in the dark. The torch light was reflecting off the wolves' eyes, which indicated that they were too close to him. Before he could think of anything else, one of the wolves lunged at him. Instantly, Milarepa's body returned to its original green colour and his black pupils switched to a bleak white. When he glared into the eyes of the very wolf that pounced at him, it turned into a heavy stone sculpture mid-attack before shattering completely. The pieces hit the ground as they fell.

Immediately, the other wolves stopped and started falling back. Milarepa took his own time to look into the eyes of every wolf that looked at him as a prey. Soon enough, the whole pack was hypnotized and sitting lined up as trained dogs, waiting for their orders. Milarepa started digging the half-dug pit further and continued to do so till he finally saw Vrishkapi's hand. He grabbed his wrist promptly to check his pulse. His pulse rate was very low due to the cold and extreme loss of blood, but he was still alive.

Milarepa tried pulling him out, but realized that he was too heavy to be lifted and taken to the chopper. Vrishkapi was critical and needed immediate medical support. Milarepa looked at his new army of wolves and they knew what to do. He gave them the command without uttering a single word and started walking towards the chopper, followed by the wolves, which had pulled Vrishkapi out with their mouths.

On the other side, in the middle of the unforgiving ice, Nagendra stopped dragging LSD and Parimal after bringing them to a large, dead tree. Nagendra could see a hazy light coming from some sort of structure, but he couldn't be sure if it was real; he was panting and hallucinating. He knew that the only thing that could save all three of them was heat. He checked LSD and Parimal's bags to find anything flammable.

The only materials he could fish out were guns and bullets. He took as many bullets as he could and started peeling them open to extract the gunpowder, behaving like a hungry animal tearing through its prey; the gunpowder was smeared all over his lips and chin. LSD and Parimal, still unconscious, were tied and covered up the way body bags encase the dead in a war. Nagendra's numb fingers rubbed the gunpowder on the bark of the tree and filled it in the hollow crevices too. He then tugged Parimal and LSD a little further away before lighting the tree. The bark caught fire easily and soon, the whole tree was up in flames. Settling himself at a safe distance from the burning tree alongside Parimal and LSD, Nagendra

fainted. They looked like three corpses near a pyre, waiting for their turn to be cremated.

At Kailash, Om was recounting his first memories. ‘I opened my eyes. My vision was hazy but I could still see three figures standing at a distance. One of them beckoned to the other to call Dhanvantari as I was showing signs of movement. Dhanvantari walked in and showed me my reflection. I was devastated when I took my first look. A hollow eye socket, a missing ear and the decayed skin of my face haunts me till this day,’ Om muttered with his eyes closed. ‘That’s my first memory.’ Om opened his eyes to find Ashwatthama looking at him.

‘Now, that’s the thread that will take you behind the locked doors of your memory, which holds your hidden story. You were forty years old when you were revived by Dhanvantari and given a second birth. The memories of those forty years are still locked away in your consciousness. Everything that a person ever witnesses in their life is registered in the brain. All that information might not be important and the person might forget it over time but still, nothing is ever entirely wiped out. Go further back, Om. What did you see last before looking at those three vague figures? Hold that thread and keep wading through the murk of your past. Show me where this thread takes you.’ Om continued to fixate his mind to find the answers in the darkness of the unknown within him for hours till the first light touched Mount Kailash.

With the sound of flowing water and chirping birds all around, Parimal opened his eyes and found himself cocooned alongside an unconscious LSD with reddened skin and frostbite. LSD was so close to him that he could feel the warmth of her breath fanning his face. Parimal caught the inner side of the zip and pulled it down to free himself. When he raised his head, he saw a full-grown tree burning till the tip of its height. He looked around and found Nagendra’s bare body lying near the burning tree. Parimal noticed that LSD was clad in Nagendra’s warm clothes. He recalled his last memory of Nagendra entering the rocks to rescue LSD. Parimal tried to get up but realized that his foot was tied to LSD’s, followed by a tail of rope. Parimal instantly understood the rest. He untied his legs and hastened to check on Nagendra.

Chapter 9

The Fourth Immortal

Prithvi turned to Mrs Batra and found her lost in her own thoughts. Mrs Batra realized that Prithvi had stopped and was looking at her. Mrs Batra responded, sharing the thought she was lost in.

‘During those days, Tej conducted multiple tests to verify the validity of his experiments with Om’s blood. Once he had collected enough data and evidence to support his claim, he started making calls to the heads of the medical departments of some of India’s most renowned institutions to come and visit our home and examine my past reports and present condition. He hoped they would declare that he had made a major breakthrough in the world of medicine by bringing me back from the jaws of death,’ Mrs Batra recounted.

‘I can feel the warmth of fire on my face,’ Om muttered with his eyes closed. Ashwatthama, sitting right in front of him, could clearly see Om sweating despite the sub-zero temperature on Kailash. ‘I hear hundreds of men chanting together, I see the feet of an elephant and the hump of a bull and . . . and—’ Om’s eyes snapped open in fear and he jerked back as if trying to distance himself from something.

‘Are you okay?’ Ashwatthama offered him a piece of cloth to wipe his face. Panting heavily, Om took a moment to regain his composure.

‘Sorry! I could not concentrate further. I thought . . .’ Om gulped the rest of his statement before saying, ‘We should try again. Shall we?’

Ashwatthama put a hand on Om’s shoulder. ‘Om, I need to know what you saw in order to help you. Tell me, what scared you out of your trance?’

‘I felt like I was sitting on something—riding it—something wider than a horse that had a hump on its back, and then . . . then I turned around and there was a serpent right on my face, hissing at me. It might have just been a dream, I suppose,’ said Om, preparing to go back into a trance again.

‘It wasn’t a dream, Om. To you it must have felt like one but it was not a dream. It’s a memory; an unclear, incomplete memory. We need to decipher this. Yes! We shall go back. We shall restart,’ assured Ashwatthama.

‘If it’s a memory, why haven’t I ever seen it before? I have tried to revisit my past numerous times,’ asked Om, wondering.

Ashwatthama had a clear answer to that question. ‘What do we do if our hands are not enough to push open a door? We use more hands to push it. The memories preceding your rebirth are trapped inside your brain behind a door stronger than you can push alone. And that’s where I come in. While you meditate, and follow the thread of your memory in the dark, I support you externally by pushing the door harder.’

‘A fire pit, an elephant’s foot, an unusual chanting, a serpent—does all of this signify anything?’ wondered Om.

Ashwatthama shared his thoughts. ‘I think these might be glimpses of some major events from your life, or metaphors linking to one major event. We should soon be able to know how these visions are pertinent to you. So, are you ready to go back there?’

‘Yes!’ said Om, mentally prepared to revisit the memory.

They closed their eyes again. As they meditated to go into their astral forms, their bodies became lifeless and dropped to the ground.

Back in Roopkund, someone else was returning to consciousness under the shell of a burnt tree that still provided some heat. Nagendra faintly saw the figure of Parimal standing right in front of him as he awoke. Everything that had happened the previous night rushed back to his head and his droopy eyes widened immediately to look for LSD.

‘She is alive; frail and unconscious, but alive. I checked on her. She will be fine,’ said Parimal, comforting Nagendra.

Nagendra tried to stand up to check on LSD himself but Parimal held him by his shoulder, gently pushing him down to a seated position as he, too, needed to recover.

‘Where are we?’ After the snowslide the previous night, Nagendra just wanted to bring them some heat. He didn’t care or even notice where he had dragged Parimal and LSD to.

‘We are near the forest rest house in Wan village,’ Parimal explained their location.

‘Did the burning tree attract any attention?’ Nagendra asked.

Parimal pointed to the three dead bodies lying at a distance and said, ‘The chef of the rest house and the two old security guards.’

‘Are the bodies still fresh?’ asked Nagendra.

Parimal nodded.

‘Arrange for us to leave this place,’ Nagendra ordered, his gaze still fixed on the unconscious LSD.

Parimal acknowledged his command and offered some hot water to Nagendra and along with it, a gun. Nagendra took them both and Parimal turned away to begin arrangements for a ride.

‘Give me your knife,’ Nagendra said.

Parimal looked at the dead bodies again. He walked back to Nagendra, handed him the knife and left for Wan village.

On his way back to Kailash, Parashurama’s tracking device started beeping suddenly. He took it out and was amazed to see that both the dots denoting Vrishkapi and Milarepa were now together. Parashurama zoomed in to locate them and rushed to the marked location, which was somewhere above the mountains and moving rapidly towards Kailash.

Fighting the battle of life and death in Milarepa’s lap, Vrishkapi was still out of his senses in the chopper flying towards Gyanganj. As the chopper hovered above Mount Kailash, its systems started to malfunction one by one. Milarepa knew that in order to enter the hidden city, he had to land on Kailash and walk the rest of the way hauling Vrishkapi, because there was no way that a chopper could locate or enter Gyanganj. He ordered the pilot to land. The chopper landed at a safe spot. Milarepa lugged the limp and massive Vrishkapi out of the chopper with great difficulty.

He then walked to the pilot and said, ‘Thank you, my friend! Fly back to where you have come from. The moment you land back at your base, the spell shall break.’ The possessed pilot nodded with a blank face and flew back. The next challenge was to take Vrishkapi to Gyanganj before his soul exited this realm. Milarepa had to cover miles with Vrishkapi’s body before that and he had no idea how.

Suddenly, Milarepa heard a rustling nearby, along with the sound of heavy footsteps. It was coming from behind him, but as he turned, the shuffling shifted to his right, then to his left. The more Milarepa tried to follow it, the faster it switched. Milarepa closed his eyes and concentrated hard to locate the source of the sound. After a few minutes, he heard the rustling finally stop. He opened his eyes to find a large ape-like creature standing a few feet away from him. It was taller than a grizzly bear and its fur was a dirty white colour. Milarepa realized that it was actually a Yeti, also known as Bigfoot. It is rarely ever spotted, but its footprints, found at various places in the Himalayas, have birthed many a rumour. However, the

Yeti wasn’t alone. A striking old man walked towards them and the Yeti bowed.

Elsewhere on Kailash, deep in meditation, Om and Ashwatthama stood in their astral forms at the gate that held the obstructed memories. They pushed the heavy door open with great effort and watched the bizarre visuals unfold before them again, only this time, Om was seeing a horse’s hooves instead of an elephant’s feet and a peacock’s neck instead of the serpent. With every passing second, it was becoming harder for them to focus on the scenario. The door was too heavy for even the two of them together to keep open. Their struggle was painted all over their expressions as they were feeling fear and the heat of the fire in a havan kund.* They still managed to stand firm and watch until a young man transformed into a monster and approached to attack them. Ashwatthama opened his eyes to return to his body, leaving Om, who became too weak to keep the portal open. He was blown out of the door frame and the door closed on his face before the monster could reach Om. Om opened his eyes and sat up. He looked at Ashwatthama and they both knew that they had no explanation for what they had seen.

‘I don’t know who he was,’ Om admitted, taken aback by the attack.

‘We will find out. What’s important is that we could open it. Now, we have to keep it ajar for a longer time and for that, we need more power,’ said Ashwatthama, wondering who could provide more power.

‘What do you mean?’ enquired Om.

‘We need a yogi with a meditative force much stronger than mine to go inside with you,’ Ashwatthama said as a plan started taking shape in his head.

‘And who would that be?’ Om was curious to know.

‘There are weapons that even I cannot possess. They are too mighty for me to control and command. In the same way, I can’t hold this door open, but there are some warriors more powerful than me. They can summon weapons that I can’t, and they should also be able to keep the door open.’

‘You mean Parashurama,’ Om concluded.

‘Yes, he is stronger too, but he has bigger things to look after right now than meditating with you to unfold your past life.’

‘The warrior Ashwatthama was hinting at Kripacharya,’ Prithvi told Mrs Batra.

‘Kripacharya?’ Mrs Batra was clueless.

‘Hanuman, Ashwatthama and Parashurama are the more prominent immortals of the seven but that does not imply that the remaining four are weak or less powerful in any way. Ved Vyasa, King Bali, Vibhishan and Kripacharya have their own journeys, strengths and stories too.

‘Ashwatthama’s mother, Kripi, had a brother named Kripa. Kripi and Kripa were not born the usual way, from a human womb, but emanated directly from the semen of their father, Shardwan, which had fallen on the ground. Kripa was later chosen as the acharya (teacher) of royal children, and that bestowed upon him the title of Kripacharya. He was the acharya of the Kauravas and the Pandavas during their youth, and later on, was also a participant in the battle of the Mahabharata from the Kauravas’ side. Kripacharya was the epitome of ethics, laws and truth. He always stood by his principles, even in the face of adversity. He was the best archer that the world had ever seen before Arjuna. He eventually went on to secure a very important place in the epic of the Mahabharata by his strict adherence to values. That is what made Ashwatthama’s uncle, Kripacharya, superior to Ashwatthama’s father, Dronacharya, and granted him immortality. Dronacharya perished in the war but Kripacharya was one of those eighteen great warriors who remained alive afterwards. Kripacharya is considered to be the foremost among all the seers of Kali yuga.

‘The Mahabharata describes the power of Kripacharya thus: “Kripacharya was capable of managing 60,000 warriors single-handedly in the battlefield. He ravaged the entire foe’s army like a blazing fire. In fighting the battles bravely, he is comparable only to the son of Lord Shiva, Karthikeya, who vanquished the demons.”

‘When the war had ended, and the days of mourning had passed, Yudhishthir, the eldest of the Pandavas and the new king of Hastinapur, forgave his afflictions and dissolved all their enmity with Kripacharya, for he knew that the Brahmin was wise and only fought on behalf of Duryodhana because of his sworn loyalty to the throne.’

Om was expecting to meet the fourth immortal and was curious about where he was. He asked Ashwatthama, ‘I heard that after the war, he was appointed as a teacher to instruct King Parikshit, the son of Arjun. Then, after the collapse of the Kuru dynasty and at the beginning of Kali yuga, he just disappeared into history. There is no mention of him in any subsequent stories, nor was he seen by anyone,’ Om said.

‘Yes, that’s right. It is because he chose to disappear. Let’s say that it’s his trait; that is how he has always been. But since the beginning of Kali yuga, he has been with me,’ replied Ashwatthama with pride.

‘Oh, right. You had mentioned earlier that he only comes when needed and only you can summon him. What does that mean?’ asked Om.

As a response to that, Ashwatthama joined his hands and closed his eyes. Ashwatthama’s astral form started searching for Kripacharya near perennial rivers and deep caves. His search didn’t last long. It ended in Kailash itself when he saw Kripacharya along with Milarepa, followed by a Yeti who was bringing the wounded Vrishkapi into Gyanganj. Ashwatthama opened his eyes, anxious about what he had seen.

‘What happened?’ Om asked.

‘Vrishkapi needs help!’ Ashwatthama stood up and started walking away in a hurry; Om followed.

By the time Parimal returned with medicines and a vehicle, Nagendra had feasted upon half of one of the three dead men. Parimal strode towards LSD while Nagendra continued to feed on the fresh flesh. Parimal first injected LSD with a warm intravenous saline solution, after which he used humidified oxygen administered with a nasal tube to warm her airways and help raise the temperature of her body. He then put LSD in the car, turned on the heater to the highest possible degree and went back to Nagendra.

‘What next?’ he asked.

‘Next is another off-the-radar hideout till the upcoming raid,’ Nagendra said with blood smeared on his mouth and his hands, red dripping from his elbow. Parimal couldn’t take his eyes off Nagendra even after he had stopped speaking. Noticing his stare, Nagendra offered him a piece of the meat he had just cut out in front of him. Parimal humbly refused.

‘Wait for me in the car,’ he said.

Parimal turned and went back to LSD.

Following the tracking device that showed both Milarepa and Vrishkapi together, Parashurama reached Gyanganj. Milarepa and Vrishkapi were being aided by the great Kripacharya and the Yeti. From the other side, Om and Ashwatthama were also coming for support.

‘What happened?’ Parashurama asked.

Milarepa shook his head to show he didn’t know how Vrishkapi’s condition came about.

‘Is he alive?’ he asked, this time to Kripacharya.

‘Yes! But he wouldn’t be for long, if not treated immediately,’ Kripacharya replied worriedly.

Ashwatthama and Om struggled as they took Vrishkapi from the Yeti. Kripacharya introduced everybody to the Yeti, ‘Meet Ballhaar.’ The Yeti bowed his head. Kripacharya thanked him and then he disappeared into the snow. All of them rushed to Gyanganj.

As soon as they arrived at the hut with Vrishkapi, the seers began their treatment. Parashurama and everyone else examined Vrishkapi’s wounds once he was cleaned of all the dried blood. Parashurama noticed the most lethal wound on his neck.

‘He was attacked from behind,’ Parashurama affirmed.

‘He is so mighty. How did someone reach his neck?’ Milarepa asked.

‘Because he has never been taught to cheat or bluff! A warrior’s code of honour dictates that the enemy should always be attacked from the front. Vrishkapi may be mightier than humans, but he is not cunning and surely not a coward to either attack or expect one from behind. He has not been defeated; he has been tricked,’ Parashurama said.

‘O seers, will he survive?’ Ashwatthama asked.

‘We doubt that. The wounds are fatal and the poison . . . it has spread rapidly, corroding his tissues. He has lost a lot of blood and time,’ replied one of the rishis.

‘Hmm . . . please do whatever you can.’ Parashurama folded his hands before leaving the hut and the seers reciprocated his greetings. The rest of the warriors followed Parashurama out.

‘What brings you here, Kripacharya?’ Parashurama asked.

‘I don’t know yet. Ashwatthama summoned me,’ replied Kripacharya, looking at Ashwatthama.

Parashurama looked at Ashwatthama, who assured them, ‘Everything is okay on my front. We just needed a little astral guidance; everything is under control.’

‘Yes! For now, it is. Kripacharya, please guide them. Milarepa, please walk with me,’ Parashurama said.

‘The tracking device had only indicated your location, Milarepa. I had lost all hope of seeing Vrishkapi again. How did you find him in the vast Himalayan series?’

‘Because of you, dear Parashurama! While departing for our respective locations, you shared a piece of information with me: that Vrishkapi was

obedient. And you ordered him to follow the same route to get back to Gyanganj from Roopkund. I simply traced the same path leading to Kailash to find him.'

'You did great work, Milarepa. But there is much more to be done.'

Milarepa knew what he meant. Time was slipping by rapidly. They needed to strategize for their next move. 'We have lost a warrior and the second place out of nine. He has advanced one more step closer to his aim,' Milarepa expressed his concern.

'Yes, this has also reduced our chances of encountering him because now we have to anticipate which one out of the seven remaining places he will choose to desecrate next.' Parashurama's gaze grew distant.

'So, what should we do now?' asked Milarepa.

'We need Ashwatthama. Let me talk to him about his progress with Om,' said Parashurama.

Meanwhile, Ashwatthama introduced Om and Kripacharya. Om folded his hands and greeted Kripacharya. Kripacharya did not pay much heed to who Om was; he had come to Gyanganj because his nephew had invoked him.

'Ashwatthama! What makes you call me?'

Ashwatthama explained everything in detail about Om, from Ross Island to Gyanganj and from Dhanvantari to Parashurama, and then requested Kripacharya for his help. He mentioned how the door inside Om's brain was too strong for him alone to keep ajar for a long time and that was where he needed help. Their strategy included Ashwatthama guarding Om inside his memory and Kripacharya keeping the door open to save them both from being trapped inside. Kripacharya agreed to help. Now it was time for all three of them to meditate together in order to bond with Om. But right before they sat down, Parashurama called everyone to share the plan.

Parimal sat in the driver's seat of the car and closed the door, the sound of which woke LSD. Parimal turned to comfort her. 'Everything is fine.'

'Where is Nagendra?' she asked.

'He is eating outside. He asked me to stay with you. He will join us in some time,' Parimal replied.

'What happened there?' she wished to know.

'You suffered hypothermia and I fainted as well. Nagendra dragged us here. That's what happened,' he replied in limited words.

'I don't remember anything clearly,' she said, trying to remember.

‘Neither do I, but I will never forget whatever I do remember,’ Parimal smiled with a hint of mischief, thinking about something.

‘What do you remember and why are you smiling?’ she questioned.

‘Last night, I saw a new Nagendra desperately searching for you in the storm, as if he had lost his own daughter. He was terrified by the thought of losing you forever. I was wrong about him. He loves you!’ Parimal continued smiling while telling her that.

Right then, Nagendra came and sat in the back seat beside LSD, who was still weak but safe. Nagendra looked at LSD with the same stern gaze and ordered Parimal, ‘Let’s go!’

‘Where to?’ asked Parimal, starting the engine of the stolen car.

Nagendra gave him a piece of paper which had an address written on it. Parimal took a moment to read it and started driving.

After covering nearly 40 km from Roopkund, while crossing a bypass road on their way to the destination written on the piece of paper, Nagendra ordered Parimal to stop the car and got out of it, saying, ‘See you in Bharatpur National Park after twenty-five days. Be safe.’

‘I want to come with you,’ LSD said.

‘A female penguin can never raise its young on its own. The male is needed to protect the fragile shell of the egg. And they mate for life, because there is no other option,’ Nagendra said as he turned away and started walking.

They drove away, leaving Nagendra on the road. LSD, unaware of the plan, asked Parimal, ‘Where is he going?’

‘I don’t know. He didn’t tell me,’ replied Parimal, wondering.

‘And where are we going?’ LSD had her next question ready.

‘To a village called Shetpal in the state of Maharashtra,’ he replied, driving and looking outside at the road.

‘Why?’ LSD’s questions were natural and so Parimal continued answering.

‘Because I have ancestral property there.’

LSD did not know what else to ask. She looked back at Nagendra, who continued to trudge in the opposite direction.

‘Alexa, guide us to Pantnagar airport in Kathgodam.’

‘Pantnagar airport is 243 km from here. Drive straight for another 600 metres and turn right,’ the robotic voice of Alexa intoned from the car’s speakers.

‘It will take us a few hours to reach the airport. You are weak. You need to rest. I’ll wake you up when we are there.’ Parimal stretched his right hand behind him without taking his eyes off the road, offering her a packet of chips and a bottle of mineral water.

At Kailash, Parashurama briefed Kripacharya about the situation. ‘I am glad that you are here, Kripacharya. Unfortunately, Mansarovar and Roopkund have been ruined entirely. We have lost two words, which now leaves us with seven places to secure but only four men to guard them. Ashwatthama, we need you on the ground now. If Om is not ready yet, he will have to stay here. We can’t risk him till he is ready.’

‘We need more time with him,’ requested Ashwatthama.

‘You have twenty days before you leave. See what can be achieved in that duration. I have to go and consult Ved Vyasa,’ Parashurama said before walking away.

Ashwatthama’s eyes turned to Kripacharya, ‘We have to start now.’

Leaving the three warriors there, Milarepa went to check on Vrishkapi, who was still fighting a losing battle.

Chapter 10

The Shadow Figure

‘Wake up!’ Parimal shouted to LSD, who was fast asleep in the back seat. LSD rubbed her eyes and sat up to see that the car was parked outside a hospital.

‘What are we doing outside a hospital?’ she asked.

‘We need to ensure that the baby is fine,’ replied Parimal.

LSD was not used to such emotional displays. ‘So now, will you take decisions on my behalf like a typical husband?’ she retorted with an eye roll, but definitely did not expect Parimal’s response to be so brusque.

‘I don’t give a shit about you or this child. Is that clear enough for you to get it straight once and for all? I am only following my orders. Now either you step out or I get back in the car, drive to the airport and tell him that you refused.’

LSD was shocked and hurt by his tone. She stepped out of the car and waited for Parimal to lead the way. Parimal was only doing what was asked of him. He had deliberately chosen a hospital that was not crowded in order to finish the check-up as quickly as possible. They entered the hospital, collected their token and walked directly towards the maternity ward since they were the only patients in that section.

They were greeted by a friendly lady doctor, who asked them to take a seat.

‘We need to know if the foetus is okay,’ Parimal came straight to the point.

‘Foetus? That’s strange! Usually people call it *the baby*,’ the doctor bit back a smile and continued, ‘Are you the husband?’

‘How does that matter? Is that going to decide whether the baby is okay or not?’ LSD snapped this time.

Parimal could sense her agitation, so he tried to assuage her by saying, ‘Yes, I am the father.’

This calmed LSD a little. They went through the sonogram silently and everything turned out to be normal. From there, they left for the airport.

Around the same time, Nagendra reached the submarine. As he proceeded to enter his restricted chamber, one of the crew members followed him to ask if he needed anything, without anticipating the atrocity of what he was going to be exposed to; something that he would not be able to contain. By the time Nagendra tried to close the door of his chamber, the man's remnants were splattered on the ground in a pool of blood. Nagendra saw the mess, collected the intestines of the dead body, which were still intact, took them inside and closed the door. As he walked in, a colossal shadow towered over his body, drowning almost half the room in darkness. Nagendra offered the coil of intestines to the figure in front of him casting the enormous shadow.

'We have the second word,' Nagendra said.

The shadow grew bigger, asking Nagendra to submit the word. Nagendra opened both his palms and the shadow absorbed it.

'The next words will be tougher to fetch. They will set more warriors against you. The locations will be guarded. You will be outnumbered,' the shadow's booming voice resonated throughout the room, warning Nagendra.

At Kailash, Ashwatthama and Kripacharya sat with Om to unravel his past secrets and life. They started meditating; their lifeless bodies fell to the ground as they connected to their astral forms. They were soon standing in front of the closed door of Om's memories.

'Opening it is not a challenge, keeping it open is. My powers were not enough last time,' Ashwatthama said.

Kripacharya nodded. 'Open it!'

Om and Ashwatthama pushed the door open. They walked in.

Ashwatthama gathered his strength to hold it open for a little while as Kripacharya prayed and chanted a few words. A big white sphere emerged in his hands. He stuck the sphere at the entrance; that would keep the door from shutting.

They walked into a completely black void. The path ahead and their surroundings only became visible as they walked further. Everything that they passed was too ambiguous to help derive a concrete meaning.

Kripacharya saw an infant lying alone on the ground. The baby had a black birthmark on the sole of its left foot. He cradled the child in his arms and smiled at it. He then offered the baby to Om to hold, asking him if he recognized it.

‘No, I don’t. Is that my childhood?’ Om wondered aloud.

‘Lift your left foot,’ Kripacharya said to Om as he took the child back again from his arms.

‘Why?’ Om asked, lifting his foot and showing it to Kripacharya anyway.

‘Because this child has a black birthmark on its left heel. But you don’t, so that can only mean this isn’t you,’ explained Kripacharya.

‘If it’s not Om, then why are we seeing him in his past?’ Ashwatthama voiced Om’s thoughts before he could.

‘Maybe because this boy held some significance in his past,’ Kripacharya deduced.

‘How?’ Om looked at the baby as if trying to read his eyes.

‘There’s only one way to find out. We move ahead.’

Kripacharya turned to put the baby down and walk away when a villager wearing a plain white dhoti approached them. The man introduced himself as Vishnuyasha and smiled at Kripacharya, extending his arms gently to take the infant from his hands. Kripacharya happily handed the baby over.

Meanwhile, the sphere keeping the portal from closing continued to crack under pressure. They didn’t have much time. ‘We must move ahead,’ Kripacharya said as he walked forward, followed by the two.

The trio trailed further and saw a toddler playing alone on the ground. Nearby, a woman was busy rustling up a meal with whatever was available to her. They saw the same birthmark on his left foot as he crawled.

‘Seems as though we have walked about two years into your memory,’ Ashwatthama reflected.

Ashwatthama noticed a sparrow approaching the child, who seemed curious to see what the moving toy was. The sparrow hopped closer and the woman was still busy cooking. The baby picked it up gleefully to play with it. He giggled as the sparrow fluttered around his arms and neck. After a few moments of playing around, the kid suddenly turned stiff as an unexpected fit of pure rage overtook his joyous cackles. He gripped the bird tightly by both its wings and tore them right off. The bird screeched in pain and the kid clenched its neck, twisting it to silence the screaming. Even Kripacharya and Ashwatthama, the immortals who had been witnesses to great cruelty over the years, were stupefied by the kid’s atrocious actions.

Ashwatthama tried to step in but was stopped by Kripacharya. ‘These are past events and memories, Ashwatthama. Whatever happens with this kid now has already happened. Trying to change anything here might affect

everything in his future. We are here only to learn, not to alter,' Kripacharya reasoned.

Ashwatthama halted at Kripacharya's orders, but couldn't take his eyes off the kid. The bird died then and there. The kid then looked Ashwatthama straight in the eye and Om said, 'Stop looking at him like that. It's making me uncomfortable.'

Kripacharya knew they had to hurry now. The sphere wouldn't be able to sustain the door's force for long and could be on the verge of breaking, in which case they wouldn't have much time to exit.

Just when they were about to head back, they noticed a baby elephant's footprints on the sand. The tracks led to the same boy, now four years old, playing with a baby elephant.

But before they could understand the scene further, the sphere had given in to the pressure and started collapsing. The door began to close and Kripacharya commanded all of them to rush back immediately.

All three of them began sprinting towards the door. They were confident about reaching it in time until they realized that everyone they had crossed on their way in was dashing towards them like an army ready to stop them. The tiger, the horse, the serpent, the elephant, the peacock, the bull—the whole herd of animals roared and charged at them. All the villagers, including Vishnuyasha, turned violent and stormed them from all sides.

The short distance of a few steps suddenly seemed like an impossible leap for Kripacharya, Om and Ashwatthama as there stood an army between them and the door. The challenge was to protect Om and themselves without harming any of them and reach the closing door before it trapped them completely. Kripacharya took on the elephant, the tiger, the bull and the snake while Ashwatthama defended Om and himself from the children, women and other men attacking them. Om noticed an old man with glowing eyes hovering above and looking at all of them, especially Om. Om tried to warn the others but they were too busy protecting him and defending themselves while trying to get out. The old man and Om met each other's eyes before Kripacharya created a blast of light that blinded everyone attacking them. Ashwatthama and Kripacharya pulled Om and ran for the door before the sphere collapsed. Right before stepping out, Om turned back to look at the old man once again. The old man was strangely unaffected by the brightness and maintained his stare without a blink till the last moment before the door finally closed.

After finally exiting the astral realm and returning to their physical forms, they opened their eyes. Kripacharya was furious and troubled by the events he had witnessed. He jabbed a stern finger in Om's direction and said, 'I want to know everything about him. His memory before Dhanvantari is deliberately locked. I need to know the intention behind that, to identify what we are fighting against here. He is not just a random subject of Dhanvantari's trial who became a successful experiment of immortality. There is a reason why Dhanvantari sent Milarepa to you and Parashurama; the very reason we do not know now but Milarepa might. Call him too.' Ashwatthama stood up and stepped outside. Kripacharya followed him, signalling to Om to remain seated. Om sat there, pondering about the old man he had seen before the portal closed. Outside the hut, Kripacharya stopped Ashwatthama. 'Ashwatthama, this is way more complex than what all of us had imagined. You will never try to go back there without me. That's an order.' Kripacharya walked back to the room where they had left Om.

After sitting silently next to each other on a flight for two hours, Parimal and LSD landed at Pune airport, where an old driver with a vintage car was waiting to receive them for the drive to Shetpal, which was 200 km from Pune. As they began to move towards their destination, LSD opened her laptop instantly and started reading about the village they were visiting. A palpably uncomfortable silence still lingered between the two as a consequence of Parimal's behaviour with LSD outside the hospital. Parimal peeped at LSD's laptop screen and tried to break the ice by clearing his throat.

'May I ask you something?' he started rather timidly.

'What?' LSD's eyes remained glued to the laptop.

'When I told you about my ancestors, Sarputi and Lopaksh, and their karmic connection with Nagendra, you said that you knew that story. But it's a story that has never been documented or narrated outside our family. It has always been passed down from one generation to another; then how did *you* know about it?' Parimal asked. He could sense by the to and fro of LSD's eyes that she was tensing up a little, trying to think before answering.

'I heard it from Nagendra but I always thought it was just a bedtime story for me.'

'Bedtime story by Nagendra! How long have you been with him?' LSD shifted in her seat slightly, making it obvious that this was yet another

unsettling question.

‘Since I can remember. He has raised me as his own . . .’

‘Daughter?’

Trying to avoid any further discussion about her relationship with Nagendra, she pretended to read about Shetpal on the Internet.

‘Is this true?’ She changed the topic before he could pry further.

‘What?’ Parimal asked.

‘It says that in Shetpal, snakes face no restriction in their movement and nobody in the population of more than 2600 villagers ever harms them in any way. In fact, cobras are welcomed in every house as a member of the family. Neither the cobras nor the residents feel fear in each other’s presence.

‘The people of Shetpal have gone a step ahead in their hospitality for their venomous co-residents by building a *devasthanam* (abode of the deity) in their homes. A special corner in the house is set aside exclusively for the cobras to come and cool off at any time they wish. If anyone in the village constructs a new house, they make sure to devote a hollow portion of the dwelling as a devasthanam for the snakes. Nobody knows how this culture originated in this village.’

‘You can simply say that you don’t want to talk about it rather than dodging my question with yours,’ Parimal rolled his eyes at her lousy attempt.

LSD was a little embarrassed, and so Parimal sighed and decided to play along. ‘Yes, everything you read just now is correct. This village was established by my ancestors. The entire area, housing nearly 250 families, belongs to us, like in the olden days, when landlords owned villages.’

When they arrived in Shetpal, the vintage car stopped outside a grand old mansion and the manager of the place, an amicable old man, courteously opened the door for LSD. A cluster of housekeeping staff in royal uniforms stood at the door to greet them both with gentle smiles. Parimal introduced LSD to the old manager and said, ‘Meet Shubendra! He is the oldest royal guard and caretaker of this mansion. He has been serving this family for the last three generations.’

‘It feels like the start of a vacation at a resort to me,’ LSD grinned, suppressing an excited squeal.

‘Yes, only this is not a resort but my home,’ replied Parimal proudly.

The one taking orders from Nagendra as a servant was actually no less than a king himself. Parimal saw the realization dawn upon her and smiled knowingly. Walking towards the staff members standing at the entrance to welcome them, he whispered, ‘I know what you are feeling right now; yet I am no more than a servant as everything you see here is all because of him. I am the one who is burdened by the boon and freed by the curse at the same time.’

Everyone started greeting and welcoming both of them royally. The exterior of the lavish, ornate building looked like a palace. At the centre of the lush green lawn was a grand fountain with colourful flowers floating on the crystal-clear water. As she walked in through the main door, LSD felt like a princess, walking beneath the high ceilings of the mansion, the exquisite royal tapestry, the carvings on the heavy wooden furniture and the exotic silverware. Bright sunlight streamed in through large windows, leaving everything awash in a golden hue. There was a magnificent staircase leading to the upper storeys. On the ground floor were multiple long, wide and well-ventilated hallways. On their way to the dining area, they passed through one of the corridors where LSD saw many large, old handmade paintings preserved and hung in intricately carved, broad, silver frames. She stopped for a minute, seeing that the corridor was full of such similar frames, hanging at equal distances, with an unusual resemblance between all the paintings.

Comparing the two frames adjacent to each other, she kept looking at them steadily till one of the staff members spoke up to explain the exclusivity they seemed to display. It was the same old manager. ‘A king, a pet and the pet’s caretaker with a partially covered face; it has become a symbol of this house, madam. There have been many different pets, almost all kinds of animals, in this house. Like this one,’ he said, pointing with his whole palm towards the painting of a king sitting on a regal chair with a man standing next to him holding a chained crocodile. ‘The one you see on the chair was our King Krutvirya, in 1687. When he decided to keep a crocodile in the mansion, he got a full-fledged pond made for it that still exists behind the mansion. And this one here!’ He extended his arm with an open palm, directing her gaze to another frame that had another king and a caretaker with a half-covered face holding a pangolin, also known as a scaly anteater, as a pet. ‘Meet King Viswajit.’

LSD’s fingertips gently traced the painting where the pangolin was placed till Parimal broke her reverie by saying, ‘The food is ready. Please come.’

She gave a courteous smile to the manager and followed Parimal. They reached the dining hall where the walls exhibited more frames in the same pattern; a man sitting with one pet and a caretaker standing behind them with his face half-covered. The only difference was that these were not painted but photographed and these frames were considerably bigger than the ones she had seen in the corridor. Some of them were from the time before colour photographs were invented. LSD was seated on a chair pulled out by a housemaid as she entered. Her eyes were still on the photographs. Parimal addressed her curiosity, ‘As you have already understood, these are my predecessors. The frames you saw in the corridor were of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Here are the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And that one you see behind you was my father.’

LSD realized that she had missed the wall behind her since she had entered. She turned and saw a huge frame covering most of the wall. The frame flaunted a man appearing to be in his forties, sitting on a chair with a small and gorgeous Seneca white deer crouched by the foot of the seat, and the caretaker with the partially covered face standing right behind them. Parimal watched as LSD stared at the frame with an enigmatic expression.

‘The pet you see with my dad, the deer, is not an albino; it carries a set of recessive genes that produce all-white coats. I learnt about this much later. In my childhood, I was simply mesmerized by its bright white colour and thus named it Baadal. He was the only friend I had as a kid. We used to play together all day until he died when I was six. My father never brought another pet home after that and the tradition of keeping a pet dissolved just like that.’

LSD was still spellbound by the photograph when she was snapped out of it by a maid seeking her permission to serve food. She looked at the smiling girl and nodded.

‘Why are we here?’ LSD asked seriously.

Parimal heard her question and looked at the manager. He knew what to do. He silently dismissed all the other staff members from the dining room. Everyone turned and went out of the door in line.

‘Do you remember the story of Sarputi and Lopaksh, the first bearers of Nagendra’s burden?’ asked Parimal, reminding her of his clan.

‘Yes!’ LSD replied.

‘All of that began here, in this village. Sarputi was a serpent whereas her son Lopaksh had a human body and they used to live together. This is how this place got its unique reputation—people live with the snakes and have a devasthanam devoted to them. Both snakes and humans, co-existing here, know that they belong together. Our ancestral, custodial deity is Goddess Bhagavati, the patron goddess of war and fertility. The serpent is worshipped by my family as a guardian of the clan because we are believed to be the children of Kadru. Three days from now is the biggest annual prayer meet for Goddess Bhagavati. We believe this day to be the most auspicious day for marriage and baby showers, during which the Goddess herself approves of the marriage and blesses the mother and her womb. This is why Nagendra has sent us here.’

‘Are you trying to say that we are getting married in three days?’ LSD seemed agitated.

‘No! I am saying that our wedding is tomorrow. It is only when a girl is married to the man who carries the lineage of this family that Goddess Bhagavati will bless her womb with a child that holds the keyhole-shaped eyeball in his palm. The girl can either be blessed for her marriage or for her child on this auspicious day of prayer, which comes only once a year. I don’t know how to explain it. This marriage is like getting permission to be a part of the family, where you have the right to know all the secrets that no one else outside the family could ever learn, and being accepted by the Goddess before she grants you the authority and power to bear the keyhole-shaped eye in the child’s palm. No ordinary female can bear that. A banyan tree can never be planted in a pot. It needs the strength of the land as a pot can never bear its roots and growth.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me all of this before?’ asked LSD furiously.

‘Because I was not allowed to!’ Parimal defended his actions against LSD’s accusations.

‘What else have I not been told yet?’ She wanted to know everything hidden from her till then.

‘I have now told you everything that I was allowed to,’ Parimal answered cryptically.

‘That means there could be more.’

Chapter 11

Boy with the Black Birthmark

An outrageous shadow loomed large in the submarine's forbidden chamber as a grave voice reverberated through its dark corners.

'So, what have you decided?' the man's petrifying silhouette spoke as he approached Nagendra.

'I have tried capturing them before but I have always failed. They are even stronger together and with every passing day, they are conspiring to stop us from achieving our goals,' Nagendra replied.

'Yes, you are right, but there are forms other than just the physical in which they can be weakened. If you cannot defeat them all at once, you must divide them!' the voice boomed, dismissing Nagendra's perturbed stance.

'Can we do that?' Nagendra asked.

'Yes. You still have a few days before raiding Agravana. Utilize this time optimally,' the voice commanded.

'How?' asked Nagendra, seeking guidance.

'Close your eyes. Surrender yourself to me completely. It's time to meet Devdhwaja.' As the voice said 'Devdhwaja', the name furrowed Nagendra's brow.

'Only he can help you.' The shadow expanded, now drowning the entire room in its darkness. Nagendra realized that there was no option other than to visit Shambhala village.

Nagendra went outside the mystical cabin and ordered his crew members to surface the submarine. They did as ordered. Nagendra went out on deck, all alone, and shouted out loud with a smile on his face, 'Another word is hidden in Kuldhara.'

The next day, at Parimal's ancestral home, not only the mansion but the entire village of Shetpal was spectacularly adorned with flowers and lamps, representing their age-old culture. The wedding of the only royal heir was an event of grand festivity for the villagers. LSD was dressed like a majestic Hindu princess in all her glory and was a vision of sublime beauty.

She wore traditional red bridal attire woven from the finest silk, intricately embroidered with golden threads. She was covered from head to toe in the most extravagant gold jewellery, embedded with diamonds and an assortment of rare jewels.

For the first time in her life, LSD felt the burden of her duties weighing her down. Parimal, on the other hand, descending from a lineage of kings himself, definitely looked the part. He bore a striking resemblance to his ancestors in the old paintings, dressed in conventional long robes over trousers made of silk in red and gold, his head wrapped in a *saafa* and a ceremonial sword adorning his waist. LSD ambled through the corridors, looking at each frame she passed. She halted in front of one of them, her eyes lingering on it for a little longer, as if conversing with it. Then she walked on slowly, her glistening eyes taking their time to trace all of them. She was so deeply transfixed that she didn't realize Parimal was only a step away, observing her dazed self.

'What is it?' he asked.

'Nothing!' She jumped back like a thief caught in the act.

'Are you missing his presence at the wedding?' Parimal guessed confidently, referring to Nagendra.

'Not at all!' LSD replied in a high-pitched voice and started walking towards the place where the ceremony would commence. Right before entering the hall, she turned back to see Parimal, who still stood in the corridor, wondering what had lured LSD to the frames.

Breaking Parimal's train of thought, LSD spoke nonchalantly, 'Liza Samuel D'Costa was the girl I had killed to assume her identity before coming to Ross Island. My name is Latika. I thought you should know this before we are married, if at all it matters.' She then walked away, leaving Parimal to absorb that new piece of information.

The venue of the marriage ceremony was one of the voluminous halls of the mansion, where a small stage had been constructed underneath an aesthetic dome. The arrangement was surrounded by Hindu priests and a handful of locals; it was obvious that these people would be the only guests and witnesses to the marriage. The rest were feasting outside on the lawn, waiting for the bride and groom to walk out to them after the wedding.

'Which one of you is going to perform the ritual of my side?' LSD enquired.

'That is for you to decide,' Parimal walked in from behind her.

She scanned all the faces present there but her gaze did not pause at any of them, as she was looking for a specific someone amid the group. Parimal thought she was still expecting Nagendra in the crowd, but what she said next proved him wrong.

‘Call Shubendra!’ she said promptly.

Shubendra was still busy ensuring that all arrangements were satisfactory when someone came running, calling out to him. Upon being told that he was needed for the ceremony, he rushed to the couple. LSD smiled, looking at him, and said, ‘Shubendra! I want you by my side during the ceremony, but only if you are willing to bless me.’

He looked at Parimal, silently seeking his permission, which was granted with a nod and a smile.

‘That would be an honour, ma’am,’ Shubendra bowed in respect.

That was the only moment filled with genuine emotion in the whole ceremony because from there on, all the rites were performed with sheer indifference by the bride and the groom. Shubendra performed the ritual of *kanyadan* for LSD, in which the father or the guardian of the bride symbolically gives away the daughter to the one marrying her. As directed by the pandit,* he took LSD’s right hand and placed it in Parimal’s right hand, signifying his approval of the union and requesting him to accept her as his equal partner forever.

Next was *saptapadi*, the most important rite of a Hindu marriage ceremony. The pandit narrated the seven vows and the couple circled the sacred fire, for each vow as a gesture of agreement. The fire was the witness to them promising each other love, duty, respect, fidelity and a fruitful companionship. The pandit then blessed the holy union. The couple finished their prayers and vowed to be together forever. Everything happened without any display of sentiment. To them, the celebration was as dark as death and their emotions as cold as a corpse.

The next day was the auspicious prayer of Goddess Bhagavati.

Back on Kailash, after learning everything about Om’s history from Milarepa, Kripacharya gathered everyone together to discuss the situation and said, ‘The last time we entered Om’s memory, we could hardly walk four years into his life. One thing that we have learnt is that it is not going to be easy. Covering all of his waking years is going to take us several days of traversing through his unconscious mind and nothing can hold the door open for that long.’

‘Yes! But we have to come up with a plan in order to know who he actually was, how he died and why he was brought back to life. The answers lie at the end of his previous life behind the closed door,’ Ashwatthama stated.

Following the same strand of thought, Kripacharya continued, ‘That is why I suggest that we do not worry about the door closing once we enter. If a door could be pushed from one side, it can be pulled from the other too. We can still return by opening it again from the inside.’

Ashwatthama was not so certain about this. ‘Pulling the door would need twice the strength, seer. You are well aware of what it took us to push it open from the outside, despite our powers. Assuming that we will be powerless inside and exhausted by the time we return to the door, how would we pull it open? There is a high chance we will be trapped inside it forever,’ he cautioned.

Kripacharya had already crafted a plan in his head. ‘We might be powerless and exhausted inside, but not Parashurama and Milarepa. We shall decide the day and time of our return to the door and inform Parashurama before entering, so that he and Milarepa can push it open for us when it’s time. It’s crucial that we abide by our time limit otherwise returning could be impossible due to our inability to communicate with them once we are behind the closed door.’

Milarepa looked at everyone solemnly. ‘What happens if we do not return in time?’

‘You would be confined in the past forever. Your identity and existence would fade into oblivion, your bodies would be as good as dead, but will still be breathing,’ Parashurama explained.

‘There is no other way. This is a risk we *have* to take. We enter tomorrow at the break of dawn,’ Kripacharya’s firm visage was resolute as he asserted his order on Ashwatthama and Om.

Thinking of the morning, Mrs Batra said with a slight smile, ‘I too remember a morning with Tej after I had recovered to some extent. That morning, when I woke up, I noticed that Tej had made the breakfast and set the table. *It’s a breakfast date*, I thought, and got excited because it felt like a new morning, which might as well be marked as the first day of my new life. Tej was busy readjusting the already aptly placed silverware and coasters on the table. He saw me coming and flashed me a nervous smile; he seemed anxious. Just when I took a seat, the doorbell rang. Tej’s head

instantly snapped in the door's direction and he went to open it as if he was anticipating company all along. That's when I noticed that the table was set for four.

'Before I could process anything, two strangers were standing in front of me with a smile. Tej introduced all of us. They were officials from the CDC (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention) who had flown in especially to meet us. Tej had invited them to impress them on a personal level, but in reality, their prime objective was to examine me and verify if Tej's claims of curing an incurable disease had substance. In that moment, Tej seemed more like a doctor than my husband and I felt more like a subject than his wife, but these complaints were negligible in that room full of specialists. The only important fact, distinct from all these feelings, was that I was alive and healthy and it was all attributable to Tej.

'The doctors followed standard procedure and began by checking my medical history, diagnosis, stages of deterioration and convalescence period while I sat there, answering their occasional questions and looking at a nervous Tej, whose knee was constantly bouncing. That day, I questioned this miracle of life for the first time—whether my revival was really an event deserving of celebration. What could this unforeseen scientific development possibly lead to in the times to come?'

'Those days were an indelible time not only for you, but it also has great significance for many other lives in this saga,' Prithvi added, taking over again.

At the crack of dawn, Kripacharya sat down with Ashwatthama and Om to transcend into their astral forms and open the memory gate once again. Milarepa and Parashurama stood there bidding them goodbye, wishing them power and victory for the mission.

Looking at the two, Kripacharya said, 'We can only spend seven days inside as we need time to prepare for the real battle on the next crescent moon, which is on the ninth day from today. Push the gates open on the seventh day at dusk and not a minute before. If you don't see us, do not enter to seek us out. Simply close it and open it again after one day at the same time.'

Kripacharya's gaze then settled on Om and Ashwatthama. 'These are the only two escape options we will have. Based on our first and only experience, I presume that when we start our return, the attack will be the heaviest around the door, so we know that it will be impossible for us to

stay near it for very long. If we exhaust these two attempts, the odds of us reaching the door and them opening it from the other side, simultaneously, are very slim. We could be lost inside forever. Therefore, it is critical for us to make it out in time.' Kripacharya closed his eyes. Om and Ashwatthama did the same.

Soon, they glided through the astral realm, pushed the door open and entered Om's past. Milarepa and Parashurama watched as the bodies of all the three immortals dropped limp right in front of them.

Around the same time, back in the village, Parimal and LSD were ready to achieve the true purpose of their visit to Shetpal—the grand worship of Goddess Bhagavati. LSD tagged along with Parimal to the Ishaan Kon* of the mansion. They reached an elegantly carved silver door that was rather short in height for such a massive wall. It was secured with an ancient lock. Parimal retrieved its key, unlocking the door. He then bent low before stepping inside, followed by LSD. The exteriors and the small door had made her imagine it as a compact worshiping room, but to her surprise, it was actually many times bigger than the size she had pictured. The room closely resembled a huge lawn surrounded by brick walls with green grass on the floor. There was no roof; this allowed the warm sunlight to directly cascade on to them. LSD felt as though she had stepped into a holy garden. Parimal walked to a corner and LSD trailed behind, soaking in the place with much awe until she was stopped by Parimal's outstretched arm, preventing her from overstepping a line marked on the grass which she hadn't noticed.

'When will the others arrive?' LSD asked.

'Who others?' Parimal said.

'The pandit! And a few others for the prayer's preparations!' LSD spoke as if stating the obvious.

'It will be just us. She won't come to see you in the presence of any fourth soul in the room,' Parimal clarified.

'Fourth soul?' LSD looked around, searching for any other living being except the two of them.

'Your child!' Parimal reminded her.

He went into one of the corners of the room and lifted a lid in the floor. It was a small snake pit, like every other snake pit in every other house of Shetpal. He then walked back to LSD and got down on his knees in prayer. Following his lead, LSD also began to kneel but Parimal stopped her. 'No!

Not you. Keep standing. You are now a mother, bestowed with the power of *srijan*, the power of creation. Your place is much higher than me now. You don't have to bow to anyone.'

'Okay! But who are you kneeling to?' asked a perplexed LSD.

Parimal looked at the hole that he had uncovered and spoke in a hushed, calm voice, 'Don't be frightened when she emerges.'

The sinkhole-size pit started oozing emerald-green, extending in its breadth with every passing second. In less than a minute, everything until the marked line on the grass was submerged in the neon-green fluid. LSD stood still, her eyes glued to Parimal, until the water touched her feet. Suddenly the earth below her feet rumbled and she could feel something passing underground towards the opened pit. In the blink of an eye, a giant serpent tore through the collapsed ground on the very area she stood. All she could do was stare at the serpent and feel the rest of its body crawling underground, creating rumbles that reached her feet at the same time.

The serpent was nearly thrice the size of LSD, even before its whole body had surfaced. LSD's gaze travelled up to take it all in when the snake flipped its gigantic arms, which looked like bat wings. Everything around her seemed frozen and her heart skipped a beat when the enormous serpent leaned down to her eye level, piercing through her soul. LSD was petrified but she concealed it neatly. She glanced at Parimal while the creature's eyes remained glued to her face. Drops of sweat trickled down her forehead as she was determined to maintain a brave posture, her feet cemented to the holy ground. The serpent then turned towards Parimal and looked at his palms, which were barren of any lines, as if affirming his identity. LSD noticed the gills on the sides of the largest snake she had ever seen, another unusual part of the creature's body. It made her wonder what it truly was, with an amalgamation of the most unconventional characteristics—a reptile's body to crawl, a bat's wings to fly and also gills to breathe under water. Just then, the serpent turned towards LSD and spoke in a seraphic female voice.

'Did you choose him willingly?'

LSD took moments to absorb the whole scene. The incredible creature questioned again, 'Is he forced upon you in any manner?'

LSD saw Parimal, who was still on his knees with his head bowed.

'No!' LSD replied.

'Do you wish to allow the child in your womb to enter this world?'

‘Yes! I do,’ LSD affirmed.

‘*Tathastu*!’[*] The serpent wrapped her large body around LSD completely.

LSD struggled to breathe under the serpent’s tight grasp. The gills on the serpent’s neck were filled with the same green fluid and as LSD gasped for air, the liquid got sucked in through her mouth and nostrils. With empty gills, the creature now struggled to breathe and left LSD immediately.

LSD knew that she had been granted a wish that she would have to bear and honour to her ashes. By the time she was released, LSD fainted due to lack of oxygen and Parimal immediately crouched to give her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to wake her up. As she gasped back to life and saw everything reversing around her in a semi-conscious state, the creature retracted into the water and the lawn dried out. Slowly, the trench shrunk back to being a small sinkhole, leaving no trace of the series of mystic events. It seemed as if nothing had happened there. Parimal closed the lid and took LSD out of the room. She felt weak and needed rest, so she was taken to bed, where she fell asleep immediately. Parimal looked at the calendar on the side table. Seven days were left for them to leave for Bharatpur National Park, where Nagendra would be waiting for them.

There was limited time for Ashwatthama and Kripacharya as well, inside Om’s memory, to figure out who Om was. As they entered the door, they were greeted by the pin-drop silence of the pitch-black void. Everything that they had experienced in their last visit and thought they knew, had vanished. It was so dark in there that Ashwatthama could hardly see Kripacharya standing right beside him.

‘Don’t worry! This seems to be a new moon night,’ Kripacharya assured.

‘What do we do then?’ Ashwatthama asked.

‘We walk forward,’ Kripacharya replied.

They saw a distant light coming from a house and decided to walk towards it. As they got closer, they could hear someone bellowing inside. To ensure their safety and to avoid alarming anybody, they peeped in and saw a pregnant woman screaming in pain as her water broke.

‘How is it possible that there is no one around her in such an emergency? This could be a trap. We should not go in to help her,’ Ashwatthama stated firmly.

‘This is all in the past already. What we see has happened thousands of years ago and we will not intervene,’ Kripacharya said.

‘I’ll go and check the way ahead to assure our safety. Please stay here till I am back,’ Ashwatthama walked ahead.

‘She needs help. There has to be a reason why we are seeing this right now. I can help her,’ Om was growing restless looking at the lone woman in excruciating labour.

Kripacharya sensed the straining in Om’s tone against his order to stand by. ‘Maybe you know why we are witnessing this. After all, it is your past that we are in,’ Kripacharya taunted.

‘Our powers are limited. Our strength is reduced to less than half when in astral form and we cannot summon the weapons we desire in here. And above all, we are not here to engage and disturb the events but to silently observe and learn who you are,’ Kripacharya reiterated.

While they talked, the lady’s contractions continued to get worse. She also started bleeding and Om could see that she was struggling to breathe and was on the brink of losing consciousness. Looking at her condition, Om felt torn between his conscience and reasoning. Should he help the bawling mother or be utterly ignorant to her dreadful misery, simply to abide by a command? Om tried to keep his feet cemented to the ground and avoid engaging but just when she had given up, which meant the death of both mother and child, Om stormed in without Kripacharya’s permission. She was fainting and Om could not bear to be a mere spectator any more.

The woman was terrified to see a stranger standing in front of her. It was impossible to know if she was now screaming due to labour or fear. Om calmed her down and explained to her that he was there to help and not harm. The lady was soon consoled by his presence but was still dying in pain. Om immediately started preparing for a safe delivery while an irritated Kripacharya continued to ensure Om’s safety by keeping an eye from outside the hut. As the child was being pushed out by the woman, half of its lower body, the legs and feet, came out at the last minute of the darkest hour of the remaining new moon night. It was a breech birth; the baby was coming out with its feet first instead of the head.

Om caught a glimpse of the infant’s feet, which had the same black birthmark on his left heel. It did not take much time for Om to understand that he was witnessing the birth of the same child they had met in their previous visit. The remaining half of the child, the chest and head, came out a few minutes before the first light of dawn. By the time the baby was out and crying, the mother was exhausted by the delivery, and hence collapsed.

Kripacharya glimpsed some figures marching towards them from a distance, holding fire torches in their hands, so he signalled Om to get out of the hut immediately. By then, Ashwatthama had also come back to lead them further. Om had no choice but to leave the mother and child by themselves. Om rushed outside and joined the other two. The men approaching were close enough for them to leave instantly. They ran behind Ashwatthama and entered an abandoned hut.

'We shall wait here till sunrise,' Kripacharya stated.

Later that morning, they left the hut and continued on the trail. After nearly half a mile, they found two men sitting outside a hut, one of whom seemed to be a vaidya[*] who was examining a boy who seemed to be about four years old. The vaidya prepared a herbal mixture and began feeding it to the boy. The kid grimaced in distaste and leaned backwards, looking at which the other man exclaimed, 'Devdhwaja! Don't disrespect vaidya ji. Sit here and have this.'

'It's all right, Vishnuyasha, this boy is too innocent to mean any disrespect. He is too young to know the ways of the world,' the vaidya smiled.

Devdhwaja was not happy with the order but he complied with a cringe anyway. After swallowing a spoonful, the boy got distracted by his pet rabbit and went about chasing and playing with it. Before the vaidya could say anything, Vishnuyasha told him to stop and let the boy be. Om, Ashwatthama and Kripacharya monitored the little boy wherever he sprinted. He pranced around the fields with his rabbit, greeting everyone that he passed with a playful smile.

The villagers smiled back at the innocent little boy. After frolicking about for quite some time, he flumped under a tree to catch his breath. The rabbit hopped near him to sit in his lap and Devdhwaja patted it with much adoration. All of a sudden, he grabbed the rabbit's head and snapped its neck in two. The boy found a rock and bashed the dead rabbit's body with it. The air was filled with the dreadful sound of crushing bones and the child's angry grunts as a splash of blood landed on his face. His eyes went into a frenzy and a crazed look took over his innocent expressions when his tongue accidentally caught the taste of its blood from the corner of his mouth. The three of them watched, aghast at the sight they had just witnessed. After a few moments, behaving as if someone else had murdered his pet and he had just noticed it, the boy burst into tears. He cried rivers

upon rivers looking at its brutal state. A woman in a plain sari with her face covered came and picked up the crying child and walked away. It was dark already so Ashwatthama found another hideout for them to spend the night in.

When they woke up next, they couldn't tell if it was day or night; everything around them was pitch-black again. Feeling insecure about staying at one location for a long time, the trio decided to keep moving. After walking for roughly four miles, they came across a farm. As they inched closer, they realized it was a part of a long stretch of farms with each one growing a different crop. They could see the villagers labouring hard. It was harvest season and they had just begun to reap the fruit of their patient toil.

From a hut, a teenage boy came running to the farm carrying some tools. 'Be careful, Devdhwaja!' came a voice after him. Paying no heed to that and enthused to work in the field, the young boy got to work. Om, Ashwatthama and Kripacharya continued to observe his actions from behind a tree. After working for about an hour, the boy took a break. He went inside the hut and came out with a burning wooden stick. Om was puzzled; why would he need fire in the heat of the sun? As if to answer Om's question, the boy took the burning stick and swept it through the crops. The farm was ablaze at once and the flames began spreading to the neighbouring farms. Om watched in terror as the villagers scurried to save their crops and their own lives, but the fire, like the boy's eyes, was furious and greedy, consuming everything that came in its way. It did not take too long for the fire to engulf almost half the village's harvest. It was now spreading towards their homes and huts. A woman stood screaming at Devdhwaja to run. As if snapping back from a dream, the boy looked around at the combusting village in shock, like the catastrophe had just dawned upon him. Trembling in absolute fright, he ran away. Om, Ashwatthama and Kripacharya also sought shelter till the fire died down. When they emerged, everything had turned to ashes. They walked around for some time, but there was no one to be seen, just dead silence.

'We need to turn back from here,' Kripacharya said as he calculated in his head.

'But we are not done yet,' Ashwatthama objected.

'I know. This is like a jigsaw puzzle. We are finding incidents in random bits and pieces that need more time to place them in order to understand the

complete picture and for now, we don't have it. We have walked inside for three days. I believe that returning to the door will take more time than it took to reach here. We need to walk back without wasting any time.'

Back in Shetpal, LSD had woken up after days from a deep slumber, fully recovered from everything she had undergone in the name of Goddess Bhagavati's blessings. When she opened her eyes, she found Parimal standing beside the bed with a reassuring smile. As she sat up on the bed, Parimal pointed towards a dress hanging in the corner of the room. It was a set of one of her usual clothes and not some traditional attire this time. LSD's gaze shifted from the dress to Parimal again.

'Wear this and pack your bags.' With that, Parimal left the room. LSD got up and started to gather her things.

When she was almost done, someone knocked on the door. She turned and found the old manager, Shubendra, standing at the entrance. LSD allowed him in. He came and stood near her silently.

'Yes!' LSD prompted him to speak.

'I am grateful and indebted to you for choosing me to perform the rituals that are a father's responsibility,' Shubendra said humbly as his heart swelled and throat choked.

LSD smiled and hugged him. 'There is nothing that you owe me.'

'Why did you choose me for such a sacred deed in your wedding?' Shubendra asked, curious.

'Time to go!' Parimal called out from the door before LSD could answer the question.

However, as LSD stood there, ready to step inside the car, not knowing when she would visit the mansion again, she turned to Shubendra and said softly, 'Because you selflessly looked after Baadal; because you cried when he passed away. I am grateful and indebted to you for giving him a proper funeral.'

Another staff member overheard the conversation while placing the luggage in the trunk. LSD left while Shubendra stood there shocked and lost in thought. The luggage keeper came to Shubendra and asked, 'Who was Baadal?'

'The white deer and the last pet of this mansion,' Shubendra muttered, looking at the disappearing car, still awestruck by the mystery of how LSD, who had visited the mansion for the first time, knew about Baadal's death and cremation when even Parimal did not know that.

As they walked down the muddy path in the seemingly tranquil evening, Ashwatthama heard a light ruffle along the bushes. Although the three of them were always on guard, such an ambush was least expected. Before they could predict anything, a young, muscular man pounced on Ashwatthama out of thin air. As they dealt with this blindsided attack, another burly man jumped out of the branches of a tall tree and charged aggressively towards Om.

As the younger of the two lunged at them, Ashwatthama noticed the same black birthmark on his heel. It was Devdhwaja—the same child whom they had just visited was grown up. Distracted by this, he couldn't guard himself against the older man's first blow, which knocked him out. On the other hand, Kripacharya ducked away from Devdhwaja's first attack, and then guarded an unconscious Ashwatthama from the older man's second lethal assault, after which he fought valiantly with both the aggressors in his attempts to save Ashwatthama and Om. Kripacharya knew that if they dragged Ashwatthama back inside the catacomb of Om's past, he would lose Ashwatthama forever.

'Om! Drag him out of the door. Take him out. Quickly!' Kripacharya screamed, countering the two men single-handedly. Om did as commanded and rushed towards the door, lugging Ashwatthama along. He laid Ashwatthama on the ground and gathered all his might to pull the door open but failed to do so for he was alone and drained. He saw both the assaulters trying to surpass Kripacharya to reach Ashwatthama and him but Kripacharya was competent enough to hold off both of them; however, Om knew he won't be able to keep up with them for long. Seven whole days had passed since they had been inside Om's memory and the last rays of light seemed to be dissipating into darkness.

That's when the door opened and Milarepa stood right there on the other side, precisely as per Kripacharya's instructions. When Devdhwaja looked at Milarepa and the opening door, his eyes burned with pure wrath. He began to fight Kripacharya relentlessly and even more violently like an outright hysterical man. The frantic pair was overpowering Kripacharya, making it difficult to keep avoiding their swings at once. By the time Om dragged Ashwatthama out, one such strike had injured Kripacharya severely. Om saw this and hurried back to help him. Milarepa tried to stop Om but he was shoved away. As Om strode to enter the door again, Devdhwaja from the other side also ran to pull Om inside. At this moment,

Milarepa had no other choice but to let the door close and before the two could collide in battle, the door shut tight between them.

Ashwatthama and Om woke up where they had sat for meditation a week ago, whereas Kripacharya's body remained limp. Om lashed out at Milarepa for closing the door and screamed at his face, 'Is deserting people and betraying them all you can do?'

'We couldn't lose you. What he did was on my order,' Parashurama intervened calmly.

'Kripacharya is in there! We need to open the door again and rescue him. He closed the door on one of our own!' Om's despair was inconsolable.

'Open the door? And what if those who attacked Kripacharya and Ashwatthama crossed over and came to this side, in the forbidden city of Gyanganj? Milarepa is not to be blamed for what he did. He only did what was in the best interest of everybody else. Kripacharya is in there because of your inability to have total control over your brain. If you want to hold anyone responsible, then get a hold of yourself,' Parashurama shouted at Om.

Om fell silent. Parashurama realized that he shouldn't have said that. He sighed and approached Om to console him. 'He can be held captive or tortured by hunger, thirst and wounds, but he is eventually an immortal. He cannot be killed. We will bring him back, but right now, we need to gear up for another battle in this realm. Crucial time is running out and the crescent moon is just two days away. Let's go.'

Parashurama, followed by Ashwatthama, Milarepa and Om, reached another hut that looked like a huge wardrobe filled with all kinds of clothing. Om stood and looked at the three of them packing for their next mission. While they were prepping, Ved Vyasa entered the hut.

'I have learnt about one more place. It's Kuldhara.'

The new location caused Parashurama's brow to furrow in distress.

'My plan was to send Kripacharya along with Milarepa to Tejo Mahalaya and Ashwatthama would have accompanied me to Bheemkund so we could avoid contingencies like the one Vrishkapi had to endure; but now we have three men to guard three places. I wish I could have Kripacharya here,' Parashurama said wistfully.

'I can come along,' Om offered.

Parashurama simply looked at Om with half a smile. 'I understand and appreciate that you want to help, but no, you can't. Stay here and try to keep

Vrishkapi alive. Milarepa! Go back to Tejo Mahalaya. Ashwatthama! I want you to learn everything about this new place from Ved Vyasa and head for it right away. I shall go back to Bheemkund because we need more manpower. Let's hope that Nagendra does not reach one of those places that Ved Vyasa has not learnt of yet.'

Inside the submarine's forbidden chamber, Nagendra woke up, clapping his hands together in a cynical celebration. His voyage into the astral world and his meeting with Devdhwaja had been a success. They had managed to trap Kripacharya in Om's memories, who was definitely the most powerful and the biggest threat to their plans. Nagendra joined his hands together and bowed in respect to the shadow before leaving. He came back to the shore and commenced his journey to meet LSD and Parimal at Bharatpur National Park.

Chapter 12

An Unceremonious Cremation

It had been several hours since LSD and Parimal had left Shetpal. The couple sat in total silence for a long while before LSD finally spoke, ‘How dare you take me to something so dangerous? What was that creature in that room?’

‘It was the representative of Goddess Bhagavati. My mother had gone through the same process when she carried me in her womb and my grandmother before that. It was to ensure that the child you are carrying is not born blind. It was unavoidable. The creature was a reptile that can crawl on the ground, climb trees and pierce into the deepest holes of the earth, with wings to cover the sky and gills to survive in water. It symbolizes Goddess Bhagavati, who is with us everywhere, as the creature can exist on the land, in the sky and in water,’ Parimal replied, explaining.

‘Ever since that incident, I feel like something has changed inside me,’ LSD muttered, looking outside the car window.

‘Yes, I know. You need not be worried about the child’s health and safety any more. He is now a blessed child and Goddess Bhagavati is his protector,’ Parimal explained with a smile.

‘So, am I simply a carrier now?’ LSD retorted in anger, which embarrassed Parimal. LSD’s statement may have been harsh but it was true, and so Parimal tried to clarify.

‘I didn’t say that. I . . .’

‘Yes! But that’s what you meant.’ LSD was furious.

‘I only meant that your child’s gestation would be distinct from the rest. Considering what we have done so far and what we would have to do while serving Nagendra, you don’t have to be as cautious and caring as other pregnant women because the child is guarded now. The child is yours and you are his mother. No one can change that and no one is even trying to, so calm down. We are almost there,’ said Parimal, ending the discussion.

The car came to a halt. They got down and made their way into Bharatpur National Park, where Nagendra was waiting for them.

Unaware of the fact that Nagendra was just an hour and a half away from him, Milarepa awaited his uncertain arrival on the upcoming crescent moon night around the Taj Mahal, Agra. At a distance of fourteen hours from Bharatpur National Park was Ashwatthama on the other side, at Kuldhara, while Parashurama had reached the lake of Bheemkund.

Parimal and LSD walked inside the national park and spotted Nagendra standing there. They went ahead and stood by his side.

'Sometimes, a disease can make you special.' Nagendra's eyes peered distantly into the dense forest. He then turned towards both of them. 'Though peacocks are known for their striking colours, do you know there is such a kind as the white peacock? No, these birds aren't albinos; their whiteness is a consequence of leucism, which is a mutation causing partial loss of pigmentation. It is a phenomenon that harms the peacock in no way. Then why do humans even categorize that phenomenon as a disease? Idiots! Anyway, how was your visit home, Parimal?' asked Nagendra, after commenting on humans.

'The work is done, sir,' Parimal replied.

'Good! How was your visit to Parimal's home, LSD?'

LSD looked at Nagendra with an irritated frown tugging at her eyebrows and did not reply at first, but she knew she had to answer as she had been asked a question. She looked at Parimal before saying, 'The work is done, sir.' Parimal realized that her statement was a response to Nagendra but also a taunt to him.

Nagendra could sense the chemistry of expectations and disappointments, and the aggression and submission between the two. He approached LSD and knelt in front of her. He lifted her shirt and keenly looked at her tummy, which seemed shiny green in the centre.

Nagendra called both of them close and whispered, 'Good. So now we head for the hunt of our next word. We go to 19.19°N, 73.03°E.'

LSD quickly ran a search on her tablet. 'You mean the Taj Mahal! But why Agra?'

Responding to her query, Parimal said, 'It is believed by many that the Taj Mahal was originally called Tejo Mahalaya. The people dominating the Agra region in the eleventh century were Jats. They addressed Shiva as Tejaji. Jats had built many Teja mandirs, that is, Teja temples, because Teja linga is one among the several names of Shiva lingas mentioned in Hindu

architectural texts. And hence, Tejo Mahalaya literally translates to the great abode of Tejaji.'

LSD typed something on her tablet again. 'It says on this site that Tejo Mahalaya was the old name of the modern-day Taj Mahal.'

'Since the creation of the world, the one who rules the land rules its religions, rewrites yesterdays, dictates todays and influences tomorrows. People believed and claimed to have evidence in the form of written texts authored by many from those eras, about how there stood a palace named Tejo Mahalaya in the city of Agravana, ruled by the Hindu kings in 1155 AD. Just like the hands of those who worked in the mausoleum were chopped off, the name of the city was also reduced to Agra from Agravana, and the monument was renamed Taj Mahal, which coincidently stood exactly at the palace's spot,' Parimal explained.

'Which of these two totally contradicting histories, one backed by proper evidence, is actually true?' LSD asked.

'As many chronicles as there are bards! The theories have been widely discussed on Internet forums for several years and many of those arguments revolve around Oak's theory, which claims that the Taj Mahal was built by a Hindu ruler, Jai Singh, and that it was actually a Shiva temple as well as a Rajput royal palace named Tejo Mahalaya. It is believed that it was later captured by Shah Jahan, who turned it into a tomb for his wife and then renamed it the Taj Mahal,' Parimal concluded.

'I don't need to dig the corpses of the claims and kings. I don't care if it was built by a Hindu king or a Muslim invader. We need to hunt for the word, not the truth.' Nagendra dismissed their chatter, whispering, and walked away.

'Why are you whispering?' asked LSD.

'Because he is searching for me, trying to hear my plans,' replied Nagendra, whispering again.

He seemed to LSD and Parimal to have totally gone mad. Though Nagendra had dismissed the whole debate on the Taj Mahal and Tejo Mahalaya, the ever-inquisitive LSD wanted to know more about the Taj Mahal controversy. She quietly continued to google everything relevant to Tejo Mahalaya while walking beside Parimal, who led the way out of the national park.

'There is more information if you're still curious,' Parimal whispered. 'The Tejo Mahalaya claim is supported by a Sanskrit inscription known as

the Bateshwar inscription, which is currently preserved at the Lucknow Museum. It refers to the establishment of a “crystal white Shiva temple so alluring that Lord Shiva, once enshrined in it, decided never to return to Mount Kailash—his usual abode”. This inscription was found within a radius of about 36 miles from the Taj Mahal and is dated back to 1155 AD. Due to this evidence, the possibility arose that the Taj Mahal might have been built at least 500 years before Shah Jahan took credit for it. Moreover, Shah Jahan’s own court chronicle, the *Badshahnama*, admitted that a grand mansion of unique splendour, capped with a dome, was taken from the Jaipur Maharaja Jai Singh for Mumtaz’s burial.’

However, LSD was one step ahead of Parimal and read from a recent article on the Internet. ‘In a written statement filed in the Court of Civil Judge[*] in August 2017, the ASI[†] had refused to accept the contention that the world heritage site was built on a temple dedicated to the Hindu God Shiva. They told an Agra court that the Taj Mahal is, in fact, a tomb and not a temple as claimed by a group of petitioners,’ LSD read out loud with much conviction. On their way to Agra, she spent her time reading everything she could find about Oak’s theory and by the time she was done, they were close to the Taj Mahal on the evening of the crescent moon night.

On the other hand, Milarepa was now fully equipped to confront Nagendra. From the moment he had arrived in Agra, he had traversed the city, feeding the homeless. When he handed out the food, he looked deep into their eyes and revealed his true form to them. One by one, as if in a state of divine trance, every individual was entranced by Milarepa, who needed them to act as surveillance to keep a check on every visitor at the Taj Mahal. Roaming around town, he had managed to cast a spell on various animals and birds too. Under the spell of hypnotism, Milarepa’s army of nearly 100 pairs of vigilant eyes now comprised stray dogs, wild cats, cows, rats, sparrows, eagles, vultures and peacocks, among other fauna and a few men and women, looking for anything unusual in and around the Taj Mahal.

LSD was eager to go inside and witness all that she had read regarding the controversy but to her disappointment, Nagendra did not let them out of the parked car as the plan did not involve entering the mausoleum. Just then, he noticed a pack of stray dogs simply gazing at every man and woman from top to bottom that passed them. Nagendra ordered Parimal to book the top floor of some tall hotel as close to the Taj Mahal as possible.

The sun eventually departed for the day, leaving the sky vacant for the moon, which had been a symbol of catastrophe and defeat for the past two months. While Milarepa stared at the moon and his surveillance personnel kept an eye on every human being around the Taj Mahal, Nagendra looked out for any unusual movement on the ground. As his squinted eyes peered around, he observed one of the dogs still sitting at the same spot, hours after Nagendra had noticed the pack for the first time. Like many strays on the streets, this one too seemed malnourished and weak. Chunks of hair were missing from several places on its coat, exposing the fleas latching on to its skin. Its spine and ribs were evident through the thin skin, which also had old and fresh scars, possibly from fights with other canines. While the dog sat there quietly, Nagendra saw an old man walking towards it and keeping a handful of rotis (Indian breads) in front of it. To the old man and Nagendra's astonishment, the dog didn't even move an inch. Its gaze continued to follow the old man, who crossed over to the other side of the road and tried to feed other strays along the way, but all of them stayed put. Instantly, Nagendra knew what he had to look for. He started to search for the same trait in others around the Taj Mahal. The strange immobility of other animals and birds in the area could be seen clearly as such behaviour was abnormal to their species.

'They know!' he exclaimed, calling for LSD and Parimal's attention.

'Look at these animals, and even those beggars on the roadside who are not moving. They have been sitting at the same spot like objects before sunset without moving an inch from their places.'

'They seem normal to me. What is wrong with them?' LSD asked, mentally counting the immobile people and animals.

'To the average person they are just sitting and minding their business but if you look closely, you'll realize that they are hypnotized and placed at spots covering every nook and corner to report any unusual movement,' Parimal stated his analysis of the situation.

'So, they are acting like artificial intelligence with live cameras,' LSD concluded.

'We don't know how many there are. We don't know who is controlling them or where this person is located,' Nagendra expressed his concern.

'Parashurama and Ashwatthama! Who else? We are ready to take on both of them, sir. What are our orders?' Parimal said confidently.

Still looking out from the window of the hotel room, Nagendra ordered, ‘Go to sleep!’

LSD and Parimal looked at each other in surprise after hearing the order.

‘But it’s the crescent moon night,’ said Parimal.

‘Yes, it is. But this time, what we need is not the indirect light of the sun through the moon. The spot we need would be given away by the sun itself tomorrow morning with its first ray,’ Nagendra smirked.

While Nagendra waited for the next day, Milarepa, Ashwatthama and Parashurama waited for him at their respective locations, but the night passed as smoothly as flowing water.

Om assisted the other sages in trying to save Vrishkapi. While he inspected Vrishkapi’s wounded body, he came across the vicious bite mark on his neck, which showed no signs of healing and was rapidly decaying.

One of the seers noticed Om’s keen stare scrutinizing the side of Vrishkapi’s neck and said, ‘That’s a bite mark! A deed of some carnivorous animal, it seems.’ Om glanced at the seer and asked him, ‘Will Vrishkapi survive?’ But the seer’s lack of response was answer enough to validate Om’s concerns. The night passed in uncertainty.

The next day, at the crack of dawn, Milarepa and the two immortals had to return to Mount Kailash to rescue Kripacharya and learn who Om was. Ashwatthama and Parashurama immediately started their journey back but Milarepa needed some time to set all the people and animals that he had possessed free from his spell, one by one. He started releasing people in different corners that stood at their spots. As he released the stray dog that Nagendra had his eyes on, Nagendra said, ‘Time to go.’

Nagendra had underestimated the number of eyes searching for him. They walked out of the hotel towards the Taj Mahal and crossed a beggar who was yet to be released by Milarepa. The moment the beggar saw Nagendra passing with a big bag in his hands, Milarepa saw him too, but before the beggar’s eyes could follow Nagendra, he vanished into the crowd. Nagendra being spotted and then his disappearance were both major concerns for Milarepa, yet there were two things he had learnt by merely spotting him in Agra: one was his presence around the Taj Mahal and the other was the direction that he went in. Milarepa put all the remaining eyes under his command to work. All of them walked from different directions to where Nagendra was last seen and continued to walk to the permanently closed eastern gate of the Taj Mahal.

Nagendra halted at a point and looked at the sun.

‘LSD! Calculate and mark where the shadow of the tip of this structure would be right in the morning. Parimal! Secure the perimeter. Barricade the eastern sector.’

LSD and Parimal instantly started executing the orders without any questions, while all the possessed eyes searched for Nagendra. Milarepa also headed towards the Taj Mahal’s eastern corner.

A hypnotized cat simply walked to the extreme end of the eastern side till it encountered Parimal standing on the other side of the barricade. He tried to shoo the cat away before he saw a small army of animals slowly approaching in the same manner. Alarmed by this, Parimal was now panicking, but the bunch of strays appeared placid. He used his wireless to inform Nagendra of the peculiar situation and asked him to come and check for himself. As he was talking to Nagendra, Milarepa witnessed the scene through the animals and realized Nagendra wasn’t alone. He managed to notice LSD and Parimal in the area but still couldn’t spot Nagendra and knew that he needed to get closer. Nagendra responded on the wireless and commanded, ‘Hold them there as long as you can. Do not open fire; it would create a fuss and we don’t want a gathering against us.’

‘Sir, there are many more coming in! It doesn’t seem like good news to me.’ Parimal said, concerned by the increasing number of growling wild dogs and snarling cats who were now also accompanied by rats and snakes, slowly enclosing him.

‘Here is the point where the shadow will be at 6, sir,’ LSD informed Nagendra.

‘Parimal, they are not a threat, and killing them is not the solution. Fall back and take your position above the tree. They are all possessed. Look for the possessor and inform me when you find him,’ Nagendra ordered.

Nagendra pointed towards the big bag he had brought along. ‘Open that bag and take out the ultrasonic gun,’ he told LSD.

She unzipped the bag and took out a gun. It had two triggers and a scanner attached above it. LSD was still figuring out what she held when Nagendra said, ‘Now shoot it on the ground with the first trigger. It will release ultrasonic rays. Keep an eye on the scanner. The area from which the rays don’t reflect back is where the underground hidden passage is. That is the spot where you have to shoot again with the second trigger.’

Milarepa saw Parimal climbing up the tree and all the animals huddled around it. On his command, a swarm of crows, eagles and peacocks engulfed the tree for a better view. He now had a bird's eye view of the entire area and ordered his subjects to start attacking both Parimal and LSD to deter them as much as possible.

'Sir, the perimeter has been breached! They are everywhere. What are my orders?' Parimal asked through the wireless.

'Hold your fire. I want to reach the man controlling them,' Nagendra replied.

Badly bruised by the attacks, LSD stayed on her task despite the danger. She now had the depth and width of the structure they had to dig for. She pressed another trigger, which created a manhole in the ground wide enough for one man at a time to get inside. Right then, she was nabbed by the spellbound cluster. Parimal fell off the tree. The pair wanted to fight back, but they were supposed to stand down till their next orders and hence kept struggling to save themselves.

Nagendra, who was lurking at a distance all along, saw a group of people moving in their direction. He realized that they were the same beggars from yesterday and began sprinting towards the group before jumping in front of a woman who was rather skinny. He held her face firmly and stared straight into her eyes. Milarepa, who had almost reached him, came to an abrupt halt when he saw Nagendra, who felt just as close to his face because they were sharing the woman's vision. Milarepa immediately tried to release the woman from his grasp but Nagendra was quicker to use her eyes as a bridge to reach Milarepa and hypnotize him. In no time, the possessor had become the possessed. Milarepa was now totally under Nagendra's control. Everyone attacking Parimal and LSD suddenly ceased their movements. Nagendra knew that he had possessed the one controlling everyone but he was still unaware of who it actually was. 'Come to me!' Nagendra ordered while looking into the woman's eyes.

LSD and Parimal got back on their feet, both with scratches on their arms and neck. They rushed to Nagendra, who was still standing in front of the woman. Nagendra ordered Parimal to drop the foldable ladder into the hole LSD had dug. Parimal hung the ladder and Nagendra went down the hole while LSD stood guard with her gun near the hypnotized woman and the rest stood still like statues under Nagendra's spell.

Nagendra descended and found a big door ahead. He uttered the two words, ‘अविनासी अनादि’, which he had hunted from Mansarovar and Roopkund. The door disappeared and was replaced by flames on the edges. Nagendra could see the next word on the other side of the flames. It was ‘अनंता.’

By then, Milarepa had reached there and stood at LSD’s gunpoint beside the hypnotized woman.

Nagendra was required to step past the flames to acquire the word. He tried to pass through the flames but just as he closed in, the fire flared up, with a clear intent to set him ablaze. Nagendra figured that the flames were securing the word and anybody who tried to obtain it would be charred by its intensity. The word needed a sacrifice of life before its surrender and Nagendra needed a living being, surrendered to sacrifice.

‘Sir! A man just walked in and stood behind the woman you possessed,’ LSD informed Nagendra on the wireless.

There was a moment’s pause before Nagendra commanded, ‘Come here!’

Milarepa started walking towards the pit Nagendra was in and plunged right in, ignoring the hanging ladder. The fall broke his right leg, but the hypnotism made him so oblivious to the pain that despite the injury, he stood up on one leg and started limping towards Nagendra.

Nagendra dispassionately observed the silhouette of the approaching figure. But as the purple hue of the blazing fire replaced the shadows on his face, Nagendra was awestruck to see the green-skinned Milarepa standing across from him. He was seeing his former ally after nearly a millennium. But as soon as Milarepa limped ahead and his face glowed brighter in the light of the fire, Nagendra’s astonished expression turned into one of hatred and revenge. Milarepa now stood right in front of Nagendra and his lifeless eyes met Nagendra’s furious ones. Nagendra embraced Milarepa tightly and whispered in his ears, ‘You have no idea how happy I am to see you, Milarepa. You know why you are still alive? Because I never stopped regretting not being able to kill you,’ Nagendra spoke through clenched teeth. Nagendra and Milarepa had tears in their eyes. One’s eyes glistened with powerlessness and defeat and the other’s with a long-awaited rage of revenge and victory. Nagendra continued.

‘You want to reply, but you can’t. You don’t want to cooperate, but you will. You want to fight, but you can’t. You don’t want to take that word out for me, but you will. You want to save it, but you can’t. You don’t want to

burn in this fire as brutal as the fire of hell, but you will. Consider this as the reward for your betrayal. Now lift your hand and take that word out for me,' Nagendra's eyes lit up as he ordered Milarepa.

Milarepa turned towards the fire. A tear rolled down his cheek but evaporated immediately in the soaring temperature. He could not do anything but simply expose himself to the unbearable heat. He continued to inch closer to the fire with his eyes wide open.

'You wanted salvation, didn't you? Today is your day.' He watched as Milarepa's eyelashes burned, followed by the skin around his eyes. Milarepa stuck his hands inside and grabbed the word. The flesh of his hand melted slowly like an alloy. The licking flames caught Milarepa's clothes and his complete body was now on fire.

By the time Milarepa took out the word and handed it to Nagendra, most of his body was charred, but he was still standing. Nagendra took the word on his palm, expecting it to be hot, but it was not. As Nagendra held the word, it turned into dust particles and was absorbed through the pores of his skin.

Just as Nagendra absorbed the word, a tall and outstretched shadow engulfed the Taj Mahal and miraculously, the pristine white marble of the building became black granite. The one who had come to defend the word became the means of its delivery.

'The tunnel is too dark. Escort me out of this pit,' Nagendra ordered the burning Milarepa.

Milarepa, now reduced to a burning stump of flesh and bones, walked before Nagendra as a live torch while his burning skin dissolved and dropped along the way.

'*Ram naam satya hai! Satya bolo mukti hai! Ram naam satya hai! Ram naam satya hai!*' Nagendra started chanting the phrase uttered in Hindu funeral processions. As they reached the pit's mouth, Nagendra took the lead and came out. He then called Parimal and LSD.

'You wanted to know who Milarepa was, right?'

Nagendra pointed into the pit at the figure that emitted the light of the burning flames. LSD and Parimal peeked inside and saw the burning man looking up at them.

'This is—correction—that was Milarepa!'

Milarepa was scorched to the extent that it was impossible for anyone to gauge how he must have looked before. His gaze was on Nagendra as

whatever was left of him crumbled to the ground, still ablaze, as his soul exited his body.

‘Ved Vyasa! Milarepa has been burnt alive! Milarepa is dead, I cremated him without a funeral, gifting him hell for his hard-earned salvation,’ Nagendra cried in celebration, looking at the sky.

All the other men and women standing there started walking towards the pit, complying with Nagendra’s orders.

‘We are done here. Let’s go!’ Nagendra started marching away with LSD and Parimal following suit. All the hypnotized people, animals and birds went past them as the three trudged to the opposite side. Before leaving the area, LSD turned to take a look at the spellbound lot. She was devastated to see them all plummeting into the manhole and falling on the burning body one by one. The fire rose higher as all the bodies burned together. The darkness had engulfed not only this hypnotized cluster but also one of the magnificent wonders of the world as the murky smoke and the intolerable stench of burning bodies lingered in the air around the Taj Mahal.

‘*Is this the beginning of the end of the world?*’ spelt the captions of images displaying the now blackened Taj Mahal in prime-time news worldwide. This was enough for Parashurama and Ashwatthama to realize that they had lost yet another word. They both left their respective locations to confirm it with their own eyes and check on Milarepa.

Meanwhile, on Kailash, Ved Vyasa sat in silence with his eyes closed, trying to search for other destinations. It was then that he heard the voice that shook him to his core. ‘Ved Vyasa! Milarepa has been burnt alive! Milarepa is dead, I cremated him without a funeral, gifting him hell for his hard-earned salvation.’

Ved Vyasa snapped his eyes open and knew that they had lost another word. His power of hearing everything ever spoken in the universe had been used by Nagendra to mock him and convey the news of the brutal murder of one of his own.

‘I remember the news of the Taj Mahal turning black being broadcast around the world,’ Mrs Batra continued recounting. ‘The team of doctors examined me in every way necessary to decide if Tej’s name could be suggested to the Nobel Assembly at the Karolinska Institute, Stockholm, Sweden for the Nobel Prize.

‘Tej gave me an injection and started noting my temperature, blood pressure, blood sample and what not before he sat back down again, reading

the Hindu Vedas. He seemed to be searching for answers. “I am the one who returned from the dead but it’s you who has completely changed, Tej,” I said to him.

‘“Maybe you have evaded death because I have changed completely, Amrita,” Tej replied firmly.

‘“What has changed? What happened at Ross Island? What’s been bothering you since you returned? Why don’t you talk to me about it?” I asked him, not once but many times, but the answer was always the same. “Go back to your room. Please. I will tell you everything . . . when the time is right.”

‘I stood there for a while even after he immersed himself back in the pages of the ancient books. I looked at poor Pooh, who never asked for anything. I never understood what a medical science genius was searching for in the Hindu Vedas and Puranas.

‘Tej was alight with anticipation, while I continued to feel lifeless despite being alive. I felt less like a life partner and more like a subject that assured Tej’s success. He comforted me in every possible way but his happiness over me being alive and with him was buried deep under the aspiration of winning the Nobel Prize. I don’t think he even knew how I felt. He was a good man but he just could not see the darkness in him. He was blinded by the light of life he saw in me.

‘Once their subject was tested on every criterion, they left with their reports. After all that had happened at Ross Island, Tej had a fair idea of the ripple effect this breakthrough could cause. But at that time, Tej and I were ignorant of the fact that the news of this miracle was also going out with the report. Tej was focused only on the success of his experiment.’

On the way back to the submarine at Digha beach, Parimal could not stop questioning Nagendra. ‘What are you waiting for?’

‘What?’ Nagendra asked.

‘You have the books of Mrit Sanjeevani. You can be immortal. What are you waiting for?’ Parimal asked.

‘Om Shastri,’ Nagendra smiled.

‘Om Shastri! But we already acquired Mrit Sanjeevani from him,’ Parimal frowned.

Nagendra turned to look at Parimal, but instead, his gaze switched to LSD, who walked beside him. He looked down at the little bump that was visible on her lower abdomen. Nagendra clapped his hands like an ecstatic

child and approached her, still looking at her baby bump. He knelt in front of her, level with her bulging belly. LSD shared a bewildered look with an equally concerned Parimal.

Nagendra carefully put both his hands on her bump and his eyes had a spark in them. ‘Do you know that there is a unique species of frog called the red-eyed tree frog? They are carnivorous and have an average life of around five years. They are only around 2–2.5 inches big—just as small as a teacup! You know what’s unique about them other than their expanded red eyes, webbed orange feet, bright blue-and-yellow margins and their neon-green bodies?’

Parimal and LSD stood speechless and perplexed. Nagendra stood looking at LSD’s belly as if telling a story to the foetus and answered his own question, ‘These red-eyed tree frog eggs can hatch early if they sense danger. But you don’t have to sense any danger. I will protect you if Mumma and Papa fail to! Right, Mumma Papa?’ Nagendra looked up at both of them.

Covering a distance of nearly 830 km in fifteen hours from Kuldhara and Amarkantak, Ashwatthama and Parashurama reached the city of Agra, which had been the breaking news worldwide. They learnt that the authorities had found a heap of charred bodies inside a pit at the eastern gate and every dead body had been claimed except one. They suspected it, but did not want to believe, that the unclaimed body was none other than Milarepa’s. They had no paper to prove any relation with the burnt corpse in order to claim it. They saw the unclaimed body kept in the corner and left the black building, which was neither Tejo Mahalaya nor the Taj Mahal any more.

Back on Kailash Parbat, Ved Vyasa entered the hut where Om and the other seers were trying to keep Vrishkapi alive. As Om saw Ved Vyasa enter, he stood up. Ved Vyasa approached him and asked, ‘How is Vrishkapi doing?’

‘He is struggling but we should be positive. We have not lost him yet,’ Om reassured him.

At this point, Ved Vyasa had to be the bearer of bad news. ‘Yes! But we have lost another word, Om. And along with it we have lost Milarepa in this cold battle.’

Om’s expression changed from being hopeful to helpless. ‘Agra!’ With his head hung low in disappointment and grief, he said, ‘What now?’

‘I will have to divine the remaining locations faster,’ Ved Vyasa let out a heavy sigh and left the hut after taking one last look at the dying Vrishkapi. Om walked out behind him and called out to him respectfully.

‘All of this is happening because of me. I lost the book, because of which he got the locations. Milarepa died. Vrishkapi is dying! Kripacharya is trapped. I want to help. What must I do?’

‘Know yourself,’ Ved Vyasa replied calmly and walked off.

The submarine was all set to sail again. ‘Where to?’ Parimal asked.

Nagendra gave him a slip that read ‘Mandvi beach.’

Mandvi beach in Gujarat was in the opposite corner of the country. The submarine had to first go down the south coast of India, from Digha beach of West Bengal, and take a turn near Ross Island to sail up to the Gulf of Kutch in Gujarat to reach Mandvi beach. The submarine was going to take several days to cover this distance. The voyage began. Nagendra opened Mrit Sanjeevani again and read further to learn the process of acquiring the next word.

Chapter 13

Devdhwaja

While Om was changing Vrishkapi's dressing, he heard footsteps approaching the hut. Parashurama entered and judging by his expression, Om realized that the legendary immortal didn't walk in to check on Vrishkapi but to order him.

'Come with me!' Parashurama said.

Om handed over the gauze pieces to an old sage and followed Parashurama. They reached the spot where Kripacharya's body lay limp. Om knew why they were there, but still waited patiently to hear it from Parashurama.

'We are going to rescue Kripacharya,' he said. Ashwatthama also joined them as Parashurama continued, 'We never thought that Kripacharya could be trapped, but somehow that has happened. He is trapped in your past. It is you in the past that has him detained. A man with the strength to fight and confine Kripacharya cannot be ordinary.'

'Neither can the man who defeated Vrishkapi and killed Milarepa be ordinary. Please allow me to go out there and assist you,' Om insisted.

'I will, whenever Ashwatthama assures me that you are ready,' promised Parashurama.

Om and Ashwatthama looked at each other but Parashurama had more to say. 'Both of you, listen to me!'

Parashurama's commanding tone made them turn their heads at once.

'I don't want any discussion or debate on what I am about to say here. Consider this my order—both of you are going to follow it as one. I will go in alone to look for Kripacharya this time. Om, Kripacharya is trapped in your past in Satya yuga. This confinement of Kripacharya has taught us that you were extraordinary back then. There is no one to push the door open this time if all of us go in, which is why only one shall take the risk,' Parashurama explained.

'If only one shall take the risk, then why not me, sir?' Ashwatthama asked, completely willing to bear the brunt of the anticipated jeopardy.

‘Because we are fighting the battle on two fronts now! Kripacharya needs me more than you and Om needs you more than me, so no more questions about this,’ stated Parashurama, firmly putting an end to further discussion.

‘It is a span of forty years of his life inside his memory and Kripacharya could be anywhere in it. That means it could take me an immeasurable amount of time to find and rescue him. If I do succeed, we will together be able to destroy the door forever that bars Om’s memory.

‘This front of the war in this realm is solely in your hands till I return, Ashwatthama. I will do everything inside to win and you shall do everything outside to not lose. Now, push it open and let me in.’ Those were his last words before Parashurama closed his eyes. Ashwatthama and Om also followed suit. Within moments, the three of them transcended to their astral form to enter Om’s subconscious and pushed the door open for Parashurama to pass through.

Parashurama entered the door and stood there for a moment, his gaze lingering on Om and Ashwatthama on the other side as the door between them closed slowly.

Parashurama turned around and walked into the darkness in search of Kripacharya, while Ashwatthama and Om opened their eyes in the real world, next to Parashurama’s body. They lifted his body with utmost care and placed it beside Kripacharya’s.

‘What next?’ Om asked.

‘Preparation!’ Ashwatthama replied firmly.

Inside the submarine, Parimal left his chamber and went knocking on LSD’s door. The unexpected knocks startled LSD in her seat. She had been immersed in the footage from Ross Island when Parashurama had attacked them inside the interrogation room to rescue Om. She shut the laptop instantly and stood up to open the door, only to find Parimal standing there.

‘Can I come in?’ Parimal asked.

Looking back at her dishevelled room, LSD replied hesitantly, ‘It’s a mess inside.’

‘So, is this . . . between us and inside you. Let’s try and organize it a little tonight. May I?’

LSD shrugged and shifted to let Parimal into the tiny chamber. Nothing in the room was in its place. Trying to make some space to sit, Parimal picked up the bunch of maps and a laptop from the bed and put them on the little table, which was already full of clothes, chargers and other cables.

Parimal took a seat while LSD remained standing near the door. There was an awkward silence between the two. Parimal tried to remove it by initiating some small talk.

‘So! How are you feeling?’

‘Why are you here?’ LSD cut straight to the chase.

‘Listen, I am sorry for what happened between us. I was simply following orders,’ Parimal justified himself hesitantly.

‘Okay! But why are you here?’ LSD repeated in the same blunt tone.

‘You have a child in you. It is mine too . . . I mean, it is our child, both yours and mine.’

Parimal looked at LSD, who was already eyeing his face to understand what he was trying to say. She waited for him to finish his statement. Parimal also realized that, so he continued, ‘I am only trying to say that you are not alone and that I am here if you need anyone.’

‘So . . . what are you trying to be, the husband or the father?’ LSD looked agitated.

‘Both! I will take care of you and the baby,’ Parimal replied firmly.

‘Why?’ LSD asked again, this time all the more bitterly, but Parimal maintained his gentle and caring tone. ‘Because that is what a man does for his wife and child.’

‘I don’t need your care, I can handle myself.’ LSD opened the door. Parimal stood up with a sigh and headed for the exit. Just before closing the door, LSD said, ‘And I understand.’

‘What?’ asked Parimal, turning around hopefully.

‘That you are sorry for what happened between us and that you were simply following orders,’ LSD stated. It was a taunt to Parimal again.

She then placed her hand on her baby bump ‘This child and I are not your problem. I am also sorry for what happened between us at Mansarovar. I, too, was simply following orders.’ Before Parimal could say anything, LSD closed the door of her chamber. Parimal walked back to his chamber but as he reached his door, he found a young crew member standing there waiting for him.

‘Yes?’ Parimal asked.

‘He wants to see you,’ the crew member replied.

Parimal knew that the crew member was referring to Nagendra. Parimal started walking towards Nagendra’s chamber but the crew member stopped him and said, ‘No! Not that side. Please come with me.’

Parimal followed him through the narrow corridors of the submarine towards a closed door. He could feel his nerves starting to creep. The young man escorted him to the door and left. It was not Nagendra's chamber, Parimal knew. He lifted his hand to knock on the door but before he could do so, Nagendra's muffled voice emerged from inside, 'Come in, Parimal.' Parimal opened the latch and entered. He saw that the chamber had numerous small screens, keeping an eye on every movement in the submarine. Nagendra spoke,

> 'वासांसि जीर्णानि यथा विहाय नवानि गृह्णाति नरोऽपराणि।
> तथा शरीराणि विहाय जीर्णा न्यन्यानि संयाति नवानि देही।।'

'As a man discards his threadbare robes and puts on new ones, so the Spirit throws off its worn out bodies and takes fresh ones,' Nagendra elucidated.

Nagendra pressed a button on a remote and a screen played footage showing Parimal entering LSD's door. As the video stopped, Nagendra said, 'The only emotion that would have dragged you to that door without my permission would be love. I am old. Maybe I have forgotten but I am sure you would remember. Tell me, have I ordered you to fall in love?' Nagendra looked at him sternly and emphasized each word as he spoke, 'She will die one day and so will you. Your births have not occurred to love each other. She knows that clearly and you must know that too.'

Parimal began to exit the chamber when Nagendra stopped him again. 'Parimal! The next time you see her will be only when I command you to.' Parimal halted for a moment, heard the last statement and left silently.

On Mount Kailash, Ved Vyasa was also silent. He was now going through every spoken word ever in the universe as quickly as he could to hear the next place before it was too late. He hoped that someone, somewhere, in some era, must have said something about the other places where the words were hidden.

Ved Vyasa's head continued to study the echoes of myriad words from past eras, identifying and trying to find a way to help Parashurama and the others. After several days, Ved Vyasa opened his eyes as he came across the word he was searching for.

'सकल जगत!' he yelled. A seer came running to Ved Vyasa upon hearing his voice. Ved Vyasa saw the seer and asked him to instantly call Ashwatthama.

Ashwatthama was summoned at once and Om followed suit. Ved Vyasa was sitting with a dead twig in his hand. On the muddy ground were written three words under each other but they were not aligned. Ashwatthama and Om saw them and looked back at Ved Vyasa for the explanation.

'He has acquired three words so far: अविनासी अनादि अनंता from Mansarovar, Roopkund and Agravana, respectively. These words are flowing from north to south, like every major river in the country,' Ved Vyasa spoke while simultaneously drawing a line from Mansarovar to Roopkund to Agra. 'If I am correct, then I am certain that his next location will be the cursed ghost village in the land of deserts.' Ved Vyasa dragged the line towards the left of Agra.

'Cursed ghost village?' Mrs Batra frowned.

'Yes! The cursed ghost village!' Prithvi confirmed.

'Kuldhara, established around the thirteenth century, was once a prosperous village. Several inscriptions mention the caste of the residents as "Kuldhar" or "Kaldhar", from which the name Kuldhara appears to have been derived. Historical records suggest that the population of this village was around 1588 during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A retelling of the legend claims that in the nineteenth century, the village was abandoned overnight for unknown reasons. The local legend claims that while deserting the village, the villagers imposed a curse that no one would be able to reoccupy the village. Those who tried to repopulate the hamlet experienced paranormal activities, and therefore, the village remains uninhabited,' Prithvi explained.

'Where exactly is this place?' Mrs Batra bent forward.

'18 km south-west of Jaisalmer city, Kuldhara is in Rajasthan. The township was centred on a temple. The ruins of the village include 410 buildings and three cremation grounds, with several memorial stones. It was declared as a tourist spot by Rajasthan Tourism and till date, no one is allowed to stay in the village after sundown. People who have tried to stay there at night have been chased away by strange paranormal phenomena,' Prithvi concluded.

Ashwatthama now knew which way to go and so did Nagendra, but Parashurama was lost as he searched for Kripacharya in Om's past. He was on the same path and came across the same events that Kripacharya had witnessed with Ashwatthama and Om, yet there were no traces of him. Parashurama diligently continued further.

Parashurama knew that he was losing time, but there was nothing he could do to accelerate the process. He tried running in the dark, using his powers, calling out to Kripacharya, but in vain. After a day of wandering, it started raining heavily. All the villagers ran for shelter and waited for the downpour to end. All the local ponds as well as the underground storage tanks and wells were brimming with fresh water, but there was no stopping the ruthless downpour. The volume of water kept increasing with each passing moment, rendering the villagers absolutely helpless.

At the entrance of the village was a dam that aided the hamlet's residents in irrigation. After a few hours of ceaseless pouring, the dam started cracking up. Parashurama could do nothing but watch as some of the villagers sobbed in fear, while some prayed. The village was already flooding, and if the dam were to collapse, their whole community could get wiped out.

Suddenly, from the other end, Parashurama saw a young man, almost twenty years old, running towards the dam. As the lad sprinted on bare feet, Parashurama spotted a black birthmark on his left heel.

'Devdhwaja! Don't go there, it's dangerous! You might drown!' A woman's voice hollered at the young man to turn back.

Devdhwaja continued to wade through the water till he finally reached the dam. The wall kept cracking due to the pressure. He tried to hold it together and stop the current, but he realized that this strategy would not work. His eyes fell on a nearby hill and he spotted a huge boulder. He immediately rushed towards it and with a loud grunt, shoved it down to let it roll towards the dam. The villagers began to anticipate another disaster at the hands of the young man.

Just as the dam broke, the boulder rolled on to fit into its centre. The water gushed at full speed but because of the rock, it split into two streams which gushed around the village premises, making its way through the fields. The villagers watched in astonishment as the young man singlehandedly saved them all while risking his own life. Soon enough, the rain also ceased and the excess water drained away. At night, everyone repaired their houses and came out for a celebration, where they praised Devdhwaja's valour and prayed for his prosperity. Parashurama observed from a distance, his eyes still hunting for Kripacharya, who was nowhere to be found.

The next morning, Parashurama set out once again. He tramped along one of the newly formed rivers by the side of the village. After some time, he came across a gathering of villagers bowed in respect in front of a sage. From the hushed chatter of the locals crossing the area, Parashurama managed to deduce that the travelling sage had decided to halt and rest at the outskirts of Shambhala village. As the news rippled over the settlements, people came over to visit and listen to the revered sage speak.

One by one, each villager walked up to the sage to receive his blessings. Parashurama recognized Devdhwaja, a much stronger and sharper man in his late twenties, who, upon his turn, walked up to the sage and bent to touch his feet. The sage swiftly placed his right hand on the man's head and bestowed his blessings. Devdhwaja straightened up, and in one swift motion unsheathed his sword. Before Parshuram could go any closer and decipher what Devdhwaja had said to the sage, the entire surroundings turned dark, making it difficult to understand anything from a distance. Devdhwaja beheaded the sage. A collective gasp and scream of horror emerged from the crowd. The sage's headless corpse spewed blood as the head fell on the ground.

The man with the sword suddenly snapped back. The villagers wailed in fear as he disappeared into the woods. Parashurama tried to follow him but soon, everything turned pitch-black again.

Mrs Batra added, 'The path of my future, too, looked pitch-black. Medical teams kept coming to our doorstep every now and then. The home felt like a museum, sometimes a laboratory, and I felt like a relic, sometimes a subject. We were both in that house but never felt each other's presence. We were not equals any more. I felt like a mere subject, who must be perpetually indebted to her husband for her new-found life.

'This went on for months. Tej was no more a doctor but a businessman who had elaborate plans of minting money through his discovery, as he termed it in front of everyone who came for the demo of my life. All that he was waiting for were approvals and IP rights to be registered. What started as the agenda of saving me had become a means to fame and wealth. To catalyse the realization of his aspirations, the pandemic of Covid-19 hit India in March 2020. This was the same period when the Taj Mahal had turned black,' Mrs Batra recollected.

'Yes! The month of चैत्र,' Prithvi added.

‘The world was toiling to devise the vaccine and a cure for the novel virus and Tej was leading the race as he joined hands with some honchos in the pharmaceutical industry. That was another bad decision he made,’ Mrs Batra seemed disappointed.

‘Bad decision? How?’ Prithvi enquired.

‘These men often came to our house to examine me, but that day they had arrived with different plans. I was in the other room when I heard Tej’s voice rising in disagreement. I went and stood by his side. The men wanted to take me or at least my blood sample for further tests, which, according to them, were not possible in our house. Tej was not ready to share my blood sample. They offered him a huge sum in exchange for him letting them take me along. Tej lost his temper. In that very moment, I knew we had created enemies, enemies way more powerful than us, who might do more than just threaten us. They left empty-handed that day, but we knew they would return soon.

‘Tej decided to approach the government for help with his discovery, which he called the invention of a new blood type, confided to them that his life was in danger, and asked for Z-plus security. I requested him to let this obsession go. I wanted to simply go off the radar and bury that miracle of life with Tej and me. I begged and insisted, but Tej refused and rejected. After a tough negotiation from both sides, we finally arrived at a decision.

‘He gave me an address with some cash and all his chequebooks and credit cards, and said, “Take this! Pack your bags and leave. I will join you in two months. What I have discovered is a boon to humankind and I cannot betray my own race. Look around you. People are dying all over the world due to Covid-19. This blood can save millions of lives.”

‘“This blood can take millions of lives too, Tej,” I argued, unaware of Nagendra or Om’s existence back then.

‘Tej held my arms tenderly and said, “That is for humankind to decide, not us—whether they use it to save millions of lives or to take millions of lives. I have to take it to the right authority. I owe that to my nation before I vanish with you. Please, just trust me and leave,” he begged.

‘“But how will you prove it without me if I am gone? They will need a subject to experiment on and authenticate your claims,” I reasoned.

‘Tej went to his basement lab and brought out the encaged Pooh, his first subject of the experiment. He showed the guinea pig to me, smiled lovingly and said, “You are not a subject, Amrita. You are my wife. This is a subject

and its name is Pooh. I love you and that has made me do everything I have done so far. I am well aware that I've found it and it is not an invention but a discovery, and also that this is not my best discovery. My best discovery is you and I will do everything to save you. Now go. Let me deliver this to the right place and I shall come back to you, forever."

'Tej and I were married for twenty-seven years and he never broke a single promise he had ever made in that period. He said he would come back to me, forever. That was the first time he broke a promise. And along with it he broke everything, forever. He never returned. He betrayed me,' Mrs Batra burst into tears.

'No! He did not betray you. Yes, he did break the promise and didn't return, but he did not betray you,' Prithvi assured her.

Mrs Batra looked at Prithvi with wide, watery eyes and a trembling chin as she realized that he knew something about her husband.

'Where is he?' she asked, hoping to see Dr Batra again.

Chapter 14

The Old Man’s Pet

Om saw Ashwatthama packing his things hastily. He knew that he was heading for Kuldhara.

‘Take me with you. I can help,’ Om said despite knowing the answer.

‘You know Parashurama’s orders for you, I can’t overrule him.’

‘Parashurama said that I can help only when you confirm that I am ready,’ Om disputed.

‘You are not ready, Om. And you won’t be until you learn to control your mind. You must stay here and practise the astras I have taught you. You are not to leave Gyanganj till Parashurama and Kripacharya come back or I return,’ Ashwatthama said sternly.

Om accepted the orders and stood silently till Ashwatthama packed his bags and left Mount Kailash. Om stood at the edge, looking at Ashwatthama disappearing into the horizon. Walking alone on the snowy paths, Ashwatthama vanished soon. With a heavy heart, Om walked back.

On his way to the hut, a seer came running towards Om and told him that Vrishkapi had opened his eyes and was mumbling Ashwatthama’s name, so he rushed to check on Vrishkapi. He reached the hut where Vrishkapi was being tended to and saw him moving his hands and raising his head. He went close to him and softly laid his hand on Vrishkapi’s shoulders. ‘You are safe and at home. Relax and do not strain yourself too much. Your body is too weak for any movement, Vrishkapi.’

Vrishkapi muttered something in response. Om bent lower and brought his ear closer to Vrishkapi’s lips to understand what he was saying.

‘Three!’ Vrishkapi groaned just above a whisper.

‘Three? What three, Vrishkapi?’

Vrishkapi tried to say something but fainted again. Om knew that he was too weak to be woken up immediately, so he decided to wait till Vrishkapi had regained consciousness.

While Om waited for Vrishkapi to wake up, behind the closed doors of his memory, Parashurama wandered everywhere to find Kripacharya. Ever

since he had seen the gruesome sight of the sage being beheaded, everything had gone awfully quiet. Even if he came across any villager, they would just look at him either in rage or in grief and simply pass him by.

Parashurama noticed a crowd huddled around an old mud hut, peeking inside with curiosity. As he stepped a little closer, he realized that the reason for their inquisitiveness was a frail and exhausted Kripacharya, who was being held captive inside. His captors were nowhere to be seen. He knew he had to seize this opportunity to rescue Kripacharya. As he slunk into the hut, he prepared himself for an assault but to his surprise, no one attacked. He untied Kripacharya and helped him sneak out as the prying eyes of the crowd followed them, and eventually everyone left the scene.

Back on Kailash, days had passed by without Vrishkapi moving an inch. Om decided to stay beside him at all times. One morning, while meditating, Om heard Vrishkapi murmuring again. He rushed and sat beside him.

'Three!' Vrishkapi groaned in a raspy voice with his eyes still closed.

Om held Vrishkapi's hands. Vrishkapi opened his eyes and saw Om peering down at him.

'Ashwattha . . .?' Vrishkapi murmured.

'He is not around right now. Tell me what you have to say,' insisted Om.

'He . . . doesn't fi . . . ght fair . . . He is . . . not alone. They are three . . . Tell Ashwatthama . . . they are three . . .' Vrishkapi said in pain.

The distressed voices of the sages confirmed that Vrishkapi wouldn't make it. 'His end is very close,' they said.

Om looked at Vrishkapi rolling his eyes all over his body and thought, 'He is too young to go. This is not fair to him.' Vrishkapi passed out yet again. Om realized that the information was vital and needed to be delivered to Ashwatthama before he encountered Nagendra in Kuldhara and got ambushed from all sides alone. There was no one in Gyanganj to stop Om, and so he decided to go to Kuldhara himself.

As Om geared up to leave for Kuldhara, Ved Vyasa handed him a sword and blessed him. Meanwhile, Nagendra's submarine touched the Gulf of Kutch and Ashwatthama was almost there, too. Ashwatthama traversed a straight path through the unending desert for a few kilometres before the lonely ruins showed up. The sun was up in the sky by the time he reached the abandoned village.

The place was a protected site and was maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India. While the guards were busy collecting money in exchange for entry tickets to the village, Ashwatthama dodged them and snuck in. He walked around till he found a place to hide for the day.

At sunset, the authorities started ordering every tourist to vacate the village. Ashwatthama, hidden in a closed space inside the shell of a house, could hear the announcement. Soon, all the tourists were gone for the day; gone too were the guards, back to their posts, and Ashwatthama was the lone soul breathing in the ghost village.

Once he ensured that no one was around to spot him, he began to trudge through rows upon rows of abandoned mud houses with their roofs gone and ruined walls still erect, skeletons reminding everyone of a doomed past. The blowing winds made their presence known through their eerie whistling sounds, passing through the cracks of the ancient walls. At a distance, barn owls hooted periodically. There was only a faint light being emitted by the guard post. It was dark already.

Ashwatthama stopped at a place which seemed like the centre of the village. On his right was a house in comparatively good shape. He went inside it, scanned the rooms and went up the stairs to the roof, from where the whole village could be seen. Ashwatthama found an apt place to keep an eye on all sides as he didn’t know where the word was hidden. Now all he had to do was sit back and wait for Nagendra to arrive. He looked at the moon and predicted his arrival for the next night.

The darkness of the night sky was soon taken over by the shining sun of the next day. At this point, Nagendra, along with Parimal and LSD, had entered Jaisalmer. The word concealed in Kuldhara was merely 20 km away from Nagendra’s reach.

When the sun sank again and the guards were about to wrap up their work after ensuring that the place was devoid of any tourists, one of the guards noticed someone approaching them from the dark.

‘Come tomorrow, sir. It’s closed for the day,’ the guard intoned without looking at the face, but noticed that the man kept coming closer regardless. He saw Nagendra’s face, smiled and after observing his age, he spoke sarcastically, ‘All the villagers vanished 200 years ago. What are you still doing here?’

‘School is over. Go back home,’ the second guard taunted. They laughed out loud, looking at the metal bottle hung around the old man’s neck.

Nagendra also laughed along with them.

‘What you laugh at now can be your future,’ Nagendra retorted.

‘Our future! It’s at least fifty years away, old man. Now get out,’ another guard sneered.

Nagendra eyes widened. ‘Oh, is it? Fifty years is a long time to see. I can’t even see your tomorrow, because there isn’t one for you.’

‘What?’ said the guard, confused.

‘Yes! I have just erased it. I don’t like people laughing at me,’ replied Nagendra in anger.

Right then, LSD and Parimal finished them with a single swift slash of their knives. The three of them then walked in from the front entrance. Parimal and LSD wore night vision goggles and walked in different directions to secure the periphery for Nagendra, guarding the village for the uninterrupted execution of their mission.

‘Be alert and expect the enemy. I am sure someone is here waiting for us,’ ordered Nagendra and chose to use flashlights, unaware that Ashwatthama had already set his eyes on him from the rooftop.

The howling wind was haunting. The dry, dusty and forlorn lanes felt frightening to LSD.

On the other side of the lane, Parimal could sense the presence of something metaphysical. At every step, he felt as though several eyes were stalking his every movement but to his dismay, he could not see a soul.

Nagendra chanced upon an abandoned temple. The moment he reached it, he felt a strange, prickly sensation at the nape of his neck. His eyed scanned every street along the crumbling walls that crossed the temple, but to his disbelief, there was no one around. Ashwatthama kept a silent watch on him, trying to understand his next move before attacking him. While he kept a close eye on Nagendra, LSD found Ashwatthama.

‘Ashwatthama is here,’ LSD informed Nagendra and Parimal in a hushed voice through the wireless.

‘Knowing your enemy is a war half won. Take him down by surprise as he plans to take me. Let him make the first move,’ Nagendra ordered.

‘Giving him any chance would be a fatal mistake. You are in his range. He might shoot you directly,’ LSD said with concern.

‘No, he won’t! He wants the books back. He will try to capture me alive. Take up your positions,’ Nagendra whispered on the wireless.

Nagendra was absolutely right. Ashwatthama stood up from his position and jumped off the roof right on to the sandy lane. He retrieved his weapons and walked towards Nagendra.

‘He is on your right,’ LSD informed.

Parimal slunk to Nagendra’s left and LSD was already positioned on his right, creeping behind Ashwatthama. Unaware that he was surrounded from three sides, Ashwatthama walked into the trap. He closed in on the temple where Nagendra stood and said, ‘Enough, Nagendra!’

Nagendra turned to his right to see Ashwatthama approaching him. ‘Enough? No! Not enough. There are still six words left. Today I shall possess one more. That will leave me with five more to acquire. Enough would be once I get all of them.’

‘You have caused enough destruction and created enough chaos, but this is the end of your depraved journey,’ Ashwatthama warned.

‘Kill me then! Let’s bring an end to it,’ Nagendra challenged him.

Ashwatthama took another step closer to Nagendra. Nagendra moved aside and said, ‘That was the closest you could come. Enough.’

A long, shining metal rod tethered to a steel wire pierced through Ashwatthama’s back and emerged from his stomach. Ashwatthama dropped to his knees instantly and realized that he had made a mistake. ‘You are a fool! I cannot be killed,’ Ashwatthama grunted proudly.

‘And that’s why I am not trying to kill you, you fool,’ Nagendra shook his head.

Just then, the metal rod sprang open in the form of a big grappling hook with a total of eight metal spikes. Parimal, positioned behind a wall with a peephole, was holding the gun which had fired the metal rod and was still tethered to the steel wire. He pressed another trigger that yanked the wire back to the gun at high speed. Within moments, Ashwatthama was trapped by the prongs, rendering him immobile and stuck to the wall behind which Parimal operated. He was captured ten feet above the ground, between the metal hooks in front of his body and the wall behind him. Ashwatthama looked down at Nagendra, who was smirking at his rapidly healing wound, which only tightened the grip of the metal rod tearing through his torso.

Ashwatthama wrestled with the metal spikes but his quickly healing tissues covered the wound of his stomach, his arms were restricted by the firm grip of the hooks around him and he was unable to reach his weapons. This unexpected trap had rendered him helpless. His immortality truly

seemed like a curse this time as it was getting unbearably painful and increasingly difficult to get out. The part of the metal rod and steel wire that stayed within his body was now as intact as bones covered in flesh inside him. Ashwatthama knew that he wouldn't be able to get out of this, at least not by himself. Nagendra then looked at the sky illuminated by the shining crescent moon.

'It's time!' he said triumphantly.

Leaving Parimal outside to keep an eye on Ashwatthama, Nagendra went inside the vacant temple. Walking ahead a little, he found an old havan kund at the centre of the building. He ordered LSD to stand guard outside the inner sanctum.

The crescent moon's light cascading on the havan kund showed how discoloured and faded it was from centuries of disuse. To extract the word, Nagendra would have to revive the heart of the temple. He removed the old metal bottle from around his neck and unscrewed it, pouring the blood he had been carrying with him into the kund, making an offering. The kund instantly absorbed the blood and it began to spread everywhere in the interiors and exteriors of the sanctum through visible veins, circling every pillar and creeping up every wall. Nagendra's hungry eyes followed the veins as they pumped the blood, growing like a web around him. The place seemed like it was coming back to life.

Right at that moment, Om entered the village by climbing over the main gate. He felt the tremors in the ground. As he couldn't see much because of the sandstorm that was beginning to engulf the premises, he followed the tremors and ran towards the centre.

Nagendra followed the blood coursing through the veins, which led him outside the temple again. LSD also tailed Nagendra, keeping guard. Ashwatthama watched as the dilapidated buildings rumbled as if an earthquake were passing beneath them. The veins led Nagendra to an open ground where the blood was accumulated and springing from the ground like a small fountain. Nagendra knew that this was it; the blood had travelled and brought the word out here.

Just as Nagendra was getting ready to acquire the word, Om found them. He saw Ashwatthama trapped by the large grappling hook on the wall and then his eyes fell on Nagendra near the blood fountain. Om sprinted to stop Nagendra from absorbing the word. He jumped off the roof of the temple to behead Nagendra, but right before his sword could reach his neck, LSD's

bullet hit Om's palm. The bullet only grazed Om's finger as Om was in motion. This was the second time LSD had shot Om. The first was on Ross Island. LSD missed the target but so did Om, as the abrasion made him lose his grip on the sword, bringing him to the ground with a thin line of blood visible on his palm. Om did not waste any time getting back on his feet but by then, Nagendra had already plunged his hand into the blood, which was absorbed into his skin, revealing yet another word: सकल जगत.

Ved Vyasa was right this time about both, the location and the word.

The now empty veins of the architecture started cracking up. The old buildings started crumbling one by one into the sand.

Nagendra saw Om and his bleeding palm and hurtled towards him like a manic, hungry beast, while Om picked up his sword again and rushed towards Ashwatthama to free him. Om could see Nagendra coming for him and so he covered his cut to ensure that Nagendra did not get even a single drop of his blood. Parimal ran towards his gun bag and asked LSD to get one of the guards' vehicles parked near the main entrance of the village. LSD complied and went for the gate. Parimal's priority was not to attack Om but to defend Nagendra, so he too ran after him.

Om had the lead and reached the wall to which Ashwatthama was impaled. He climbed up the uneven bricks and cut the steel wire with a single swing of his sword in order to release him. Nagendra grabbed Om with tremendous force, which brought him down to the ground and his sword fell away from his arm's reach. Om was struggling to defend himself from Nagendra, who was behaving no better than a savage, but Om seemed to have dominance in this barehanded combat. By the time Parimal arrived, he saw Ashwatthama on his knees, gripping the steel rod inside him and trying to pull it out. Parimal knew that they'd have no chance of defeating them once Ashwatthama was back on his feet. He moved to Ashwatthama and shot multiple rounds on his face and head till the magazine of his gun ran out of cartridges, buying them some more time. Ashwatthama collapsed on the ground like a corpse and Parimal turned to rescue Nagendra, who was now completely overpowered by Om and had no strength left to defend himself. Om continued smashing Nagendra, whose face was now drenched in his own blood. By the time Parimal dragged Om away from him, Nagendra lay limp like a dead body.

LSD reached the dead guards and started patting their corpses for the key. She found a key with a remote lock and pressed the unlock button to

identify the car. Once the lights of the car blinked with a beep, she pressed the button, got in and started to drive heedlessly on the dusty village road to rescue Nagendra and Parimal. She kept honking to send the signal that help was on the way.

Om was now fighting Parimal, who had better combat tactics, but Parimal also knew that he had time only till Ashwatthama healed and stood up again. He started thumping Om with all the strength he had to bring him down. After a few lethal blows to his face, Om hit the ground. On the other hand, Nagendra managed to gain some strength. He woke up and sat a few feet away from where Om had fallen.

Parimal picked up Om's sword and turned around to see Ashwatthama, who had almost recovered again. He had very little time to fell Ashwatthama again and was on the verge of giving up himself as the immortality of his opponents gradually eclipsed his will. His shoulders drooped in exhaustion and he panted rapidly. He didn't know how long he would be able to keep up with this inhuman struggle. Just then, Parimal's strength spiked when he heard the blaring horn of a car. He knew it was none other than LSD coming to their rescue. This meant that Parimal would just have to protect Nagendra till LSD reached them. By the sound of the horn, he estimated the distance to be not too much. A considerably injured Parimal left Om bleeding on the ground and staggered towards Ashwatthama.

Weak and fatigued himself, Nagendra saw Om defenceless and moved towards him again. He bled from every injury on his face while clumps of dust covered his features, soaking up the blood as he swiftly crawled towards Om on all fours, like a chameleon ambushing his prey. Om could not see Nagendra behind him when he got back on his feet, but Ashwatthama was able to see both, Nagendra closing in on Om and Parimal rushing towards him. Ashwatthama took out his gun as Nagendra lunged on Om's neck for his blood like a vampire and Parimal charged at Ashwatthama with the sword to slit his throat. He had only two choices; either to shoot Nagendra and help Om or defend himself and let Nagendra get Om's blood. He knew he had two targets but not enough time to take down both, so he could take only one shot before Parimal's sword met his throat. Nagendra attacked Om and Parimal attacked Ashwatthama, simultaneously. Nagendra climbed on Om's back and then used his arms to crane his neck to one side. Nagendra sunk his teeth into Om's exposed neck

and Om howled in pain, but right before his blood could touch Nagendra's tongue and he could catch a taste of Om's blood, a bullet punctured Nagendra's face, splattering his brains in all directions. Ashwatthama had managed to aim and pull the trigger just moments before falling lifeless once again with his throat slit open by Parimal. When Nagendra's face burst, a drop of his blood went past Om's lips and it knocked him out with millions of images flashing inside his head. Within seconds, Om was paralysed by the volcano of visuals erupting inside his head.

Behind the gate of Om's memory, Kripacharya and Parashurama were thrown off by a massive earthquake. Various landscapes, people and animals started popping out and disappearing in split seconds around them. Unable to comprehend what they were seeing or what was happening, they remained the passive observers they were supposed to be.

Suddenly, on their left, they spotted a cliff on which stood a man with a strong build, who bowed to someone. Parashurama and Kripacharya were confused as they could see no one around him. They tiptoed closer till they got a good view. Down in the valley stood an enormous beast, who also bowed in respect to the man. It had the head of a female dog with a sharp jawline and striking features. Its peacock neck shimmered bright blue from a distance and its back curved into a white hump of a bull as it stood on three limbs, those of an elephant, a tiger and a horse. The fourth limb was a raised human arm carrying a lotus, which the bizarre creature was presenting to the man on the cliff. From under its head emerged a tail which was actually a serpent. Parashurama and Kripacharya were terrified yet captivated by the sight of this strange, ghastly creature.

'We've seen the boy with the birthmark grow up from a child into a man. But there's no sign of Om. How can Om be missing from his own past?' Kripacharya voiced his concern.

Before Parashurama could say anything, the scene before them disappeared and a wild gush of wind threw them outside the now open door.

In Kuldhara, everything had turned to dust. The abandoned village, which had only a few erect buildings representing its existence, was now wiped out completely, sanded down to mere dunes in a desert.

Parimal could not believe his eyes when he saw Nagendra dropping dead from Om's shoulder. LSD ran over Ashwatthama's body and stopped near Parimal, who was on his knees, burdened by his failure of being incapable of defending his master. Nagendra was dead, Parimal was shattered, Om

and Ashwatthama were neither alive nor dead, but LSD still had a good grip on her emotions, strength and plan of action. She turned back to check if Ashwatthama and Om showed any movement. Om seemed like he had fallen for eternity, as if hypnotized or dreaming, and Ashwatthama was stirring a little, with broken bones and a slashed throat. The sign was enough for LSD to assess the time she had before Ashwatthama's face became the last visuals of their lives. She screamed Parimal's name to bring him out of his daze and ordered him to get in the car. Parimal rose slowly and wobbled his way to sit inside, still looking lost. LSD drove to Nagendra's faceless corpse. She stepped out, pulled up his headless body like a sack of potatoes and dumped it inside the trunk. Parimal, still aghast and unresponsive, simply sat mum and lost. LSD closed the trunk and drove out of Kuldhara, vanishing into the night.

After they were gone, Om stood up calmly and began walking straight, as if setting out on a journey. Ashwatthama, who lay on the ground like a corpse with his eyes wide open, saw Om walking away. Om trudged on and on till the darkness engulfed him.

A few moments later, Ashwatthama woke up, sucking in a deep breath. He got up in his defensive stance and realized that they were all gone. Ashwatthama knew which way Om had gone, so he walked on the same path.

Half a mile into the journey, Ashwatthama found Om standing alone, dazed, traumatized and staring into darkness. Having no idea what was wrong with him, Ashwatthama reached out to hold him by his shoulders and as if snapping out of a deep trance, Om lost consciousness and collapsed to the ground. Ashwatthama hoisted Om on his shoulders and disappeared into the dark, leaving no trace of life behind.

LSD made a stop in Jaisalmer to stuff the trunk with large ice bricks to keep the body cold. She then continued to drive a baffled Parimal and Nagendra's corpse straight to the Gulf of Kutch and back to the submarine. As they entered the submarine, Parimal said meekly, 'Nagendra is dead and the cause is lost forever.'

LSD looked at Parimal for a second and asked him to open the forbidden chamber's door. Parimal was confused as no one else was ever allowed to enter it except Nagendra. LSD opened the bag that carried Nagendra's remains and brought it inside the chamber right next to the restricted one. The body smelled rotten as it had been more than twenty-four hours since

Nagendra's death. Parimal was still so perplexed that despite knowing they would be subjected to immense pain and negativity when the door opened, he still did what was asked of him without any questions or expectations.

LSD and Parimal endured it all as tears from their eyes and blood from their nose and ears trickled down. Their depressed thoughts surrounded them, stronger than ever before. They seemed to be possessed and powerless and all they could move by their will were their eyes. They looked towards the chamber's door as a figure walked out of it. Looking at the eight feet-tall entity with cruel eyes situated between a thick white mane of hair and a lengthy beard, they were paralysed the moment they set their eyes on him. He saw the rotting flesh of Nagendra's dead body and then walked closer to Parimal, staring deep into his eyes. Parimal unwillingly showed him everything that occurred in Kuldhara leading to Nagendra's death. While the figure saw the series of events, Parimal's eyes continued shedding tears until the whites of his eyes turned bloodshot.

The figure then placed his hand on Parimal's head and that's when he was released from the spell. Parimal dropped to his knees, breathing violently from the lack of oxygen. The figure turned towards LSD and released her as well. LSD rushed to Parimal, helping him breathe and wiping his blood.

It took them a moment to regain their composure. The figure patiently stood there till both of them were back on their feet. 'Bring him in,' the figure ordered, pointing towards Nagendra's rotten corpse. LSD moved to lift Nagendra's body and Parimal followed suit. They lifted the body and walked into the chamber. The chamber was more spacious than one could tell from the size of its door. Parimal was surprised to see that LSD knew where to put the body, as if she knew the chamber already. They placed the body on a rectangular brass surface.

When Parimal's eyes wandered around, the interiors left him shocked. The room's walls exhibited paintings and photos identical to his mansion's walls in Shetpal village. The frames displayed his ancestors with their favourite animals and the caretaker with the partially veiled face, standing behind his forefathers. All the frames were the same as Parimal's house except one. This one had the caretaker standing behind his father with his face exposed. The one who stood behind Parimal's father was Nagendra himself. Parimal was stupefied. He wanted to know who exactly the man was whose orders LSD kept obeying silently. She was calm and collected,

as if this was just another ordinary occurrence. Parimal's brain flooded with questions but LSD was unruffled, as if she had all the answers already. Parimal was about to walk to LSD, asking what they were doing and who the man was, but the deep voice grabbed all his attention before he took a step. 'Latika, you know what to do now.'

LSD obeyed his orders as sincerely as she used to abide by Nagendra's. She signalled Parimal to start walking out of the chamber with her. Parimal decided to silently follow her instructions. They came out of the chamber and LSD locked it again.

Parimal bombarded her with his questions, the first of which was, 'Who was he?'

Mrs Batra had the same question to ask Prithvi after more than two decades about the real time of the incident back in 2020, 'Who was he?'

Prithvi gave the same answer which LSD had given to Parimal, 'Shri Shukracharya!'

Agitated, Mrs Batra almost screamed, 'Shukracharya! Now who is that and why are you telling me this? I asked you where Tej is. Is he alive?' Mrs Batra was on edge, losing her patience with every passing minute, waiting to know if her husband, Dr Batra, was even alive or not; but Prithvi still kept his cool and replied patiently.

'To know what happened to Dr Batra, you have to understand what led to his disappearance in 2020.'

'Shukracharya is the preceptor of the Asuras, their high priest and guru, worshipper of the Supreme Lord, but he has remained supportive of the Asuras since Satya yuga. Nagendra was Shukracharya's best disciple. Shukracharya met Nagendra in Satya yuga for the first time before Nagendra took the corpse of the man you know as Om Shastri to Dhanvantari and Sushruta, who brought Om back to life and named him Mrityunjay. In Satya yuga, Shukracharya is known for his ability to resurrect people after acquiring the mantra that could conquer death. He acquired this rare science from Lord Shiva himself, who is known as the Conqueror of Death.'

As LSD told Parimal that the one in the forbidden chamber was Shukracharya, Parimal's mind flooded with questions and suspicion.

'How do you know this? Or should I ask, what else do I not know about you?'

‘You will have enough time to know everything that you don’t know, but right now, we need to get Om’s blood before the new moon. Only then can Nagendra be brought back,’ LSD said.

‘Do you even know what you are saying? This is a suicide mission. We have faced them once on Ross Island and then in Kuldhara. Our death is certain and they are immortals. Our defeat is inevitable if we go forward with this. Besides, how would we find Om?’

LSD grabbed his palm and placed a pen drive in it. ‘I never said we needed to find Om Shastri.’

Perplexed, Parimal hesitantly took the pen drive. Nagendra’s death, Shukracharya’s introduction, the frames of Parimal’s lineage in the forbidden chamber of Shukracharya, LSD’s mysteries yet to be discovered and Nagendra’s possible resurrection were already too much to absorb in a day for a mortal, but there was more for Parimal in the pen drive. He plugged it into a laptop and found that it had only one file. He clicked on the file icon, which took him back to the interrogation room on Ross Island, showing him how Dr Batra collected the spilled blood from the floor and exited the facility before the blasts.

‘You always questioned why we were not searching for Om to get his blood instead of hunting words. That was because I was searching for Dr Batra!’ LSD threw her hands up.

‘Did we find him?’ Parimal asked.

‘Yes! Recently found and caught,’ she said proudly.

‘And?’ asked Parimal.

‘And we need to make him tell us his wife’s location,’ LSD answered.

‘Where is he?’ was the most obvious question Parimal could have asked and he did.

‘Right here; follow me,’ LSD replied and started walking.

Just then, their submarine surfaced. LSD led him to the open deck, where they could see a speedboat coming towards them from a distance.

Although his head swarmed with questions, Parimal was tongue-tied and his jaw was clenched in anger. LSD could sense his rage as it was written all over his face. She decided to address his demeanour. ‘What is it?’

‘Who are you?’ This time, Parimal cut straight to the chase, just as LSD did when they had met in her cabin.

LSD took a deep breath before she countered, ‘Did you notice the frames of your ancestors with their pets and the caretaker, which was Nagendra, in

every frame?'

'Yes, I did, but my question is who are you?' Parimal was annoyed by her riddles.

'Do you know the names of all those pets?' LSD asked.

'I remember a few,' Parimal said as he tried to recall.

'I remember them all,' she said and continued, 'The Steller's sea cow your ancestors had in 1687 was named Aathavi. The bear macaque in 1557 was called Kalap. The crocodile that your family housed in 1926 was Padam. The weasel that your great-grandfather had was named Sabri and the spotted eagle his father had before that was called Darsh.'

'Why are you telling me all this?' Parimal shook his head in annoyance.

'Because every pet which you and your forefathers have been seeing in all those frames has been me. The last of the pets which your father and you used to play with was Baadal. Parimal! I remember the time I spent with you as a child till my death. Your manager Shubendra, whom I requested to perform the proceedings of our marriage, was the one who gave my body of the Seneca white deer a proper funeral. He actually saved my dead body from being eaten by Nagendra. He was even beaten for doing that. I remember how you sat by my side and cried when they told you that I was about to die.'

Every word she uttered mystified Parimal even more and he heard everything in disbelief while LSD continued to talk.

'The caretaker who stood in every frame was not the servant of your ancestors. The one who stood behind them was the real owner of two pets,' LSD explained.

'Two pets?' asked Parimal, perplexed.

'Nagendra always had two pets, Parimal! One that changed its body and another that changed its soul; you and me. You were told the story of when Lopaksh and Sarputi met Nagendra and she agreed to serve him in exchange for a vision and a human body. The black lion which sat beside Nagendra was me while that incident happened. I am that old.

'The dead-leaf butterfly named Malti, when Milarepa met Nagendra for the first time, and the lizard named Kark and the hyena named Kuroop who guarded Dhanvantari till Milarepa killed it and ran away—they were all me.

'It takes a thousand lives to finally be born as a human. After undergoing a thousand lives as animals, reptiles, trees, insects and birds, here I am in the form of a human being. Starting from the first child of your clan, half-

man and half-snake Lopaksh, till you, I have witnessed it all with Nagendra, with the curse that I will never forget any of my past lives.'

'Why?' Parimal still did not have all the answers.

'Due to the salvation that I was tricked for,' LSD replied.

The speedboat stopped and Tej, who was held captive, was brought on board. Parimal and LSD had to stop their conversation midway to go down to another chamber, where Tej was brought in. As they entered, one of the senior men came forward to greet them.

'What have we found so far?' LSD asked.

'Nothing much, just some addresses, a bunch of medical test papers, his ID cards, mobile phone, some money and a guinea pig.'

'Take us to him,' LSD said.

They entered and tied Dr Batra to a chair. Tej saw them and sneered, 'Kill me if you want. I won't tell you where my wife is.'

LSD went to him, untied his hands and said, 'You have misunderstood us, Dr Batra. We don't want to hurt you or your wife at all. We don't even want your wife. We just want a few ounces of the blood that saved her. That's it. We just want what we need and trust me, for that, we don't want to take lives; we just want to save one. Help us to help you . . . and your wife.'

Dr Batra kept mum, weighing his options. Realizing that she would have to push him even more, LSD continued, 'We are trying to save a life that is as important to us as your wife's life is to you. Will anything be meaningful to you if she dies? Or picture this—we capture her to only torture her every day and every night for the mistake you made by not giving us the few drops of blood on time. Time is being wasted with every passing minute, Dr Batra, and if I lose the one I am trying to save, then I promise you, I will not let you die until I find your wife, bring her to you and give her the level of misery and pain that you thought only existed in stories until you yourself beg me to kill her. And only then will I kill her . . . right in front of your eyes . . . before killing you.

'It's an easy choice for you, Dr Batra—between an award and a life most precious to you. You take a call between the two so that we can take a call about you,' LSD's sudden cynical tone left the threat lingering in the air.

'You want the blood, not my wife,' Tej said.

'Yes! But she has it in her. So we want her,' LSD asserted.

‘So, you will not hunt her down or kill me if I give you the blood?’ Tej sought her assurance.

‘Why would we? We shared our food tables. We admired you. You are an asset for the nation and we are not against you,’ LSD slowly moved closer to Dr Batra.

Knowing that it was the only way, Dr Batra told LSD that other than his wife, Pooh, the guinea pig, also had the blood.

LSD finally had what she wanted. It took them a few hours to test the guinea pig and confirm that Dr Batra wasn’t lying. Once they got what they wanted, LSD came back alone to Dr Batra with the guinea pig and said, ‘I told you that we are not against the nation, but that was only half the truth, Dr Batra. The thing is, we are against the entire human race, not just a nation.’

After that, LSD ordered the men to release Dr Batra. He was relieved but was soon taken to another small room. The men tied him up with ropes and gagged him. They placed him on a seat in front of a hatch. Dr Batra tried to grapple with them. His eyes widened with the horror of what they were planning to do. The men stepped out and closed the airtight door. In the room, the door by the sea opened up and the seat unlocked to release him into the water. Tied up and weighed down, Dr Batra passed through the hollow shaft attached to the hatch door like a gunshot and sank to the bottom of the ocean in no time. After the job was done, the hatch was closed again.

Mrs Batra had tears in her eyes as her hand clamped her mouth and Prithvi stood silent, giving her time to mourn.

After acquiring the guinea pig, LSD and Parimal walked back to the corridor. LSD held the guinea pig close to her.

‘Where did Dr Batra say he wanted to go when released?’ Parimal asked.

LSD was not ready for that question and so she looked at Parimal with a blank face. Parimal reframed his question and asked, ‘I mean, where did the men drop Dr Batra?’

‘I don’t know. I didn’t ask.’

With that said, LSD started cooing at the guinea pig, petting it with a smile and led the way again. Once again, they entered the restricted chamber where Shukracharya was just finishing the procedure prescribed in Mrit Sanjeevani. As they entered, Shukracharya took the guinea pig from LSD’s hands and held it over Nagendra’s headless body. He squeezed the

squeaking little animal and the cracking of its bones resonated in the pressurized room. Drops of the guinea pig's blood fell on Nagendra's slit neck and were immediately absorbed. The procedure was finally complete. Shukracharya stood back as Nagendra's head and body started reviving. LSD and Parimal stood awestruck as they saw the biggest miracle happening in front of their eyes.

On Mount Kailash, Om opened his eyes and found himself in his hut, with Ashwatthama sitting beside him. Kripacharya and Parashurama also walked in. Ashwatthama stood up to greet them and asked in a heartbeat, 'You're back! How did you manage to open the door?'

'We didn't have to; there wasn't a door keeping us in any more,' Parashurama explained.

'But how could that be?'

As a response, Om sat up with a distant gaze. 'That's because I remember everything now. There's no barrier between me and my hidden past any more. I remember who I am.'

'Who are you?' Kripacharya asked.

Om closed his eyes and took a deep breath. 'I am Devdhwaja.'

'But . . . that can't be! We checked. You don't have the birthmark!' Ashwatthama said, trying to wrap his head around the new revelation.

In the forbidden chamber of the submarine, LSD witnessed Nagendra's body stirring again. Now immortal, he was gradually coming back to life, his frail, creased body transforming before them. His spine straightened and the wrinkles vanished from his face. The two witnessed in awe as young Nagendra smirked with rage in his eyes.

'Welcome back, Devdhwaja,' Shukracharya announced with pride, as LSD and Parimal spotted the black birthmark on the heel of Nagendra's left foot.

* A rule or aphorism in Sanskrit literature or a set of these on grammar or Hindu law and philosophy
† An esoteric doctrine regarding rituals, discipline and meditationcomposed in the form of dialogues between and Shakti
* Self-manifested

* Lunar dynasty
* Solar dynasty
† The Vedic God of fire

[*] A place for making sacred oblations to a consecrated fire.

* Priest
* The north-east corner, which is considered holy by Hindus.
* Wish granted
* Doctor

[*] Senior division
[†] Archaeological Survey of India

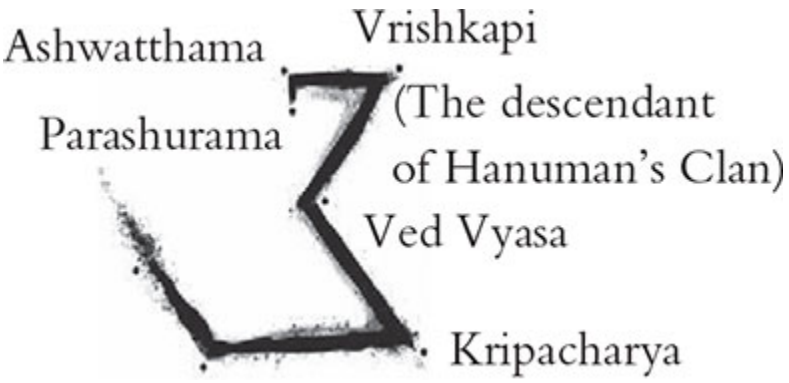
Symbols

What appears to be the tiniest can be the mightiest piece.

The unending cosmic loop of yugas starting with Satya yuga, moving through Treta and Dwapara yugas and ending with Kali yuga only to start back again from Satya yuga.

A mysterious search across Incredible India! What next!

Five out of the seven immortals found. Where are the others (King Mahabali and Vibhishana)?



Lost in the timeless journey through all yugas, who is Om?

Can time run out for the immortals too? Will they win the race against time?

Acknowledgements

Writing a book requires patience, they say. What people don’t know is the unbelievable amount of patience one needs to be an author’s shadow. Coordinating with the editors, proofreaders and publishers, balancing the workload, matching the timeliness, and bearing the author’s frustrations when he loses patience along the way. Thank you, Sashane, for taking care of all the rest, so I could write; you have been my shining shadow.

Falling apart, moving on and then reuniting with your roots, your people, your lineage and your brothers after twenty-six years. I thought that was too good to be true, like a work of fiction, far from reality. I thought it only happened in stories till it happened to me.

My dream of reuniting with all my brothers with formal smiles first, followed by drinks diluted by tears of laughter became a reality. We had a reunion after twenty-six years.

Saurabh Gupta by name, yet I choose to call him Manu Bhaiya, my (हमउम्र), with whom I shared my innocent childhood.

Ankit and Romi, our first siblings, our first responsibility.

Though I should mention Sankalp and Salil, Sawan and Honey sound more like family and brothers. Meethi, the only sister and the youngest among all of us.

Should I be thanking Nishant Gupta and Avinash Gupta, who brought us all together? No! We brothers call them Mickey Bhaiya and Ankit.

Thank you for the unconditional acceptance and the same childhood warmth and laughter all over again.

Bade Bhaiya, this is a tribute from all of us. You will be among us in our hearts and memories until we reunite in the next world. Rest in peace, Bhaiya.

Sharma Sahil, you are the man behind the curtains of my show. Younger to me, yet without saying much, you teach me so much by your actions. I appreciate you, my silent partner.

Currently a consultant and an honest first reviewer of my book, she is a retired major, paraglider by profession, traveller by heart and a beautiful

soul. The voice note queen! Paranshu, you made it perfect and showed me how the readers would perceive this part. I wish to work with you more. The amount of effort you put into this will never be forgotten.

Shikha Ma’am, trusting and showing faith in a successful man is easy. I was a nobody when you trusted me without trying and testing me. I am forever in your debt and wish to stand by your side and walk with you till the end of time.

Thank you for letting me into your worlds, Priyanshu Chopra and Vikas Hasija. When doubts and confusion arise, I am grateful for your support. It has been comforting to know that you both will always be there for me because of all the respect and laughter we’ve shared during our work. The ups and downs have made us stronger, and we can handle more together. Love you both.

Creating a flawless piece of writing takes a lot of work. I appreciate everything you have done to make it happen, Ravi, Shreya and Saloni. Thanks for making it possible.

The face of success may be just one, but it stands high on many shoulders to be seen by the world. I have many shoulders walking with me in this case. I wish to introduce you all to Milee Ashwarya. Ma’am, thank you for always bearing me with a smile. Thank you for being there and keeping the foundation of my dream iron strong.

Harish Shenoy, knowing you closely is a treat. You are special to me.

Vijesh Kumar, one of the first men within the organization who identified my potential and showed faith in me.

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Time and faith are the two most precious things you can give someone. Mrs Divya Khosla Kumar, thank you so much for gifting me both. You patiently heard me and chose to have faith in my vision. I am grateful to you from the bottom of my heart for allowing me to work with you.

Pearl, you are one of the purest souls, a self-made icon, a true gentleman and not at all an actor in real life. Blessings and love to you, brother. Wishing you success, no matter what I will always be there for you.

Mol, you came running from one side and flew the next, I am grateful to you. You have a very bright future ahead, wishing you the best.

Russel Bhai! What can I say? Let the silence do its job with a smile. Love you, brother, for always keeping me in your heart and mind.

Some things never change is an old adage. I know someone who never changed for me. Despite being in such a seat then, you trusted me with everything and nothing has changed still. This says who you are. Harshil Shah, thank you for having my back.

I believe you have invested a piece of your heart in this cover, George and Neeraj ji. Thank you for bringing this to life, my great design geniuses.

Manisha and Saumya . . . I am glad that our paths crossed. Thank you for laughing and crying with me.

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Table of Contents

Title page
Contents
About the Author
1. Land of the Extinct
2. Legends of the Past
3. Nanshaad
4. One Word and Two Lakes
5. The Scion of Serpents
6. Nine
7. The Curse and the Cure
8. Lost and Found
9. The Fourth Immortal
10. The Shadow Figure
11. Boy with the Black Birthmark
12. An Unceremonious Cremation
13. Devdhwaja
14. The Old Man’s Pet
Footnotes
    3. Nanshaad
    5. The Scion of Serpents
    9. The Fourth Immortal
    11. Boy with the Black Birthmark
    12. An Unceremonious Cremation
Symbols
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